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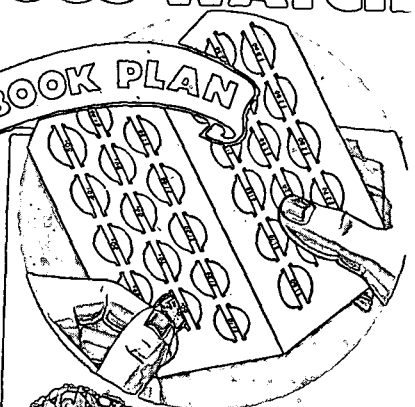

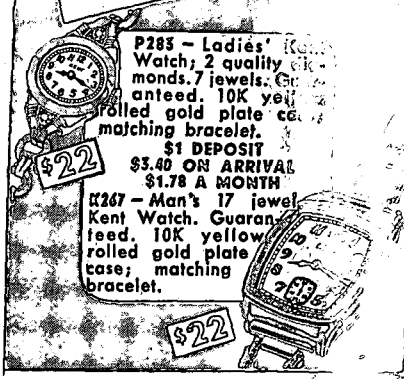

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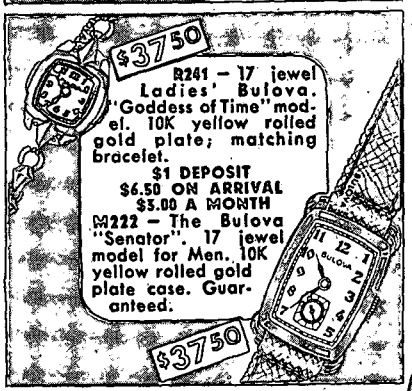
O566–17 jewel Benrus for Men. Attractive 10K yellow rolled gold plate case. Guaranteed.



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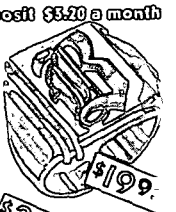

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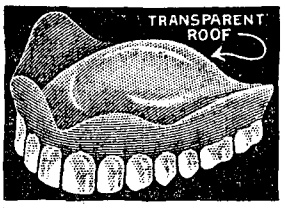

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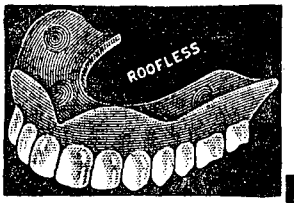

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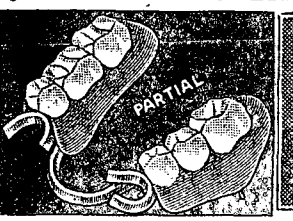

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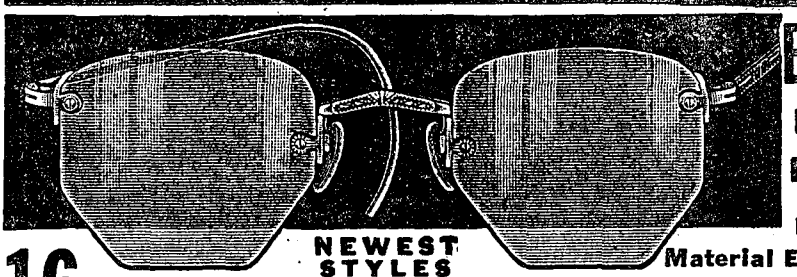

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The Magazine of Prophetic Fiction

Vol. XXII, No. 2
June, 1942

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ON THE COVER: The cover painting by Earle K. Bergey depicts a scene from Owen Fox Jerome's short story, BRITISH THERMAL UNITS

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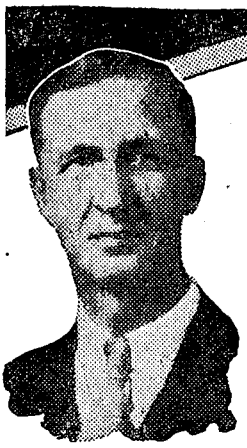

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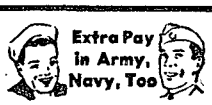

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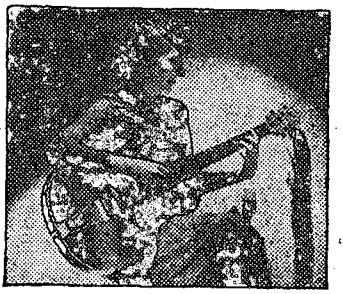

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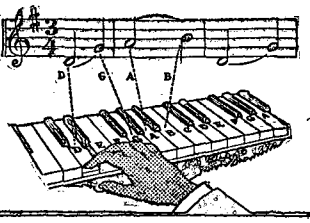

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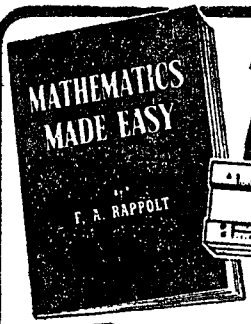

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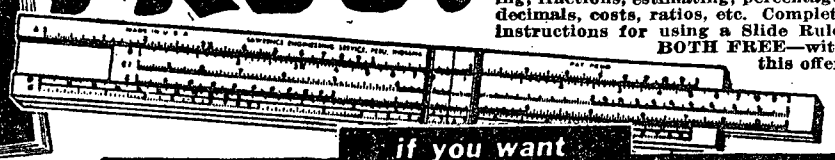

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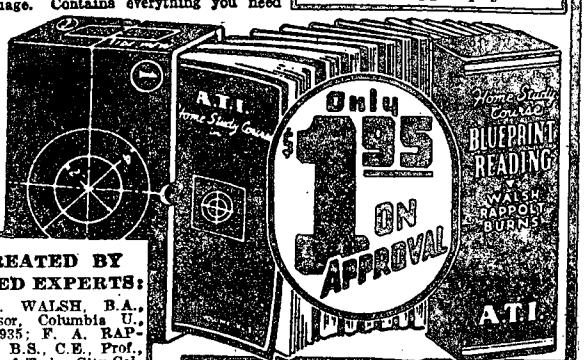

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As we pause here today for a moment to look ahead and then glance back, it is truly amazing how many great things — inventions and discoveries — of today (and tomorrow) have their roots of origin in the known past.

From the thousands of classic examples, let us select, say, three with a military angle—that subject being foremost in our minds today—and give them brief consideration. The submarine, explosives, and the aeroplane.

Contrary to popular belief, which considers the submarine as a fairly modern invention, the history of the first successful underwater vessel dates back to 1620. In that year Cornelius Van Drebel, a Dutchman in the service of King James I, built such a vessel and navigated it at a depth of fifteen feet for several hours in the Thames River. The motive power was furnished by twelve rowers, but the principal thing is—a successful submarine trial was made.

DREAMS—AND REALITY!

JUST what van Drebel dreamed would be the useful purpose of such an invention, we do not know, but today it plays a vital part in the naval power of various nations of the world. And the idea, the dream, the wish far antedated even *Mynheer* van Drebel.

Back in ancient Greece philosophers and kings were trying to invent an air tank of some sort that a diver could wear and maintain himself under water for lengthy periods of time.

Today all this is concrete reality of which Jules Verne was the press-agent, not the prophet. What will tomorrow bring?

FIRST MAN-MADE EXPLOSION

THE starting point in the history of artificial or man-made explosives begins with the discovery by Roger Bacon of a method of procuring a pure salt by crystallization. He thus obtained the first pure potassium nitrate, which we may be sure he experimented with and produced the first artificial explosion.

But this was the mere starting point, mind you. The line and list of inventive scientists and the various types of explosives are long and illustrious.

The discovery of the most powerful explosive known up to the present time—trinitrin—does not stem from the Swedish engineer, Alfred Nobel, but was invented in 1846 by Sobrero.

Nobel merely found a method of handling the stuff safely in the form of dynamite and suggested its use as an explosive to further the work of mankind constructively. And in spite of the unhappy havoc explosives have wreaked on mankind, there isn't an instant's doubt that they have been of far greater benefit.

And what does tomorrow hold for us? Will the newly developed atom smasher, the cyclotron, pave the way to the conquest of the stars by supplying the key to concentrated fuel, lack of which now holds man chained to Earth? Only by looking forward can we know!

THE WRIGHT BROTHERS

IN 1903, on December 17, at Kitty Hawk, N. C., two brothers brought years of dreams and schemes to fruition by successfully flying in a power-driven, heavier-than-air machine.

What grand dreams of future benefits to man did Orville and Wilbur Wright have that day? However extravagant their fantasy, the skies have now already surpassed them. Air power is the greatest single striking force in the business of war.

Air transportation has shrunk this old globe to the comparative size of the Moon. Twenty-ton, four-engined behemoths already plow the skyways, carrying passengers and freight, bringing the benefits as well as the curses of civilization to all the world.

But the Wright brothers did not invent the airplane. True, they built the first practical one, but the idea of flying goes back to the fables of Greek Mythology—Icarus

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with his wings that used wax for feathers instead of rivets for aluminum. Down through the ages man has tried to fly.

Just recently at the Museum of Science and Industry at Radio City there was an exhibition of the works of Leonardo da Vinci. Prominent among the exhibits was the model of batlike wings and flying frame designed by this medieval genius.

So it goes. Standing here for a moment, we look forward to a road of achievement which will yet lift man to the stars. Other things will pass, unhappy conditions and events will disappear and die, but man's march will ever be onward toward that dimly glimpsed but nonetheless tangible goal.

ROCKET WINGS OF THE FUTURE

IN his splendid short novel which we are featuring next issue, *Malcolm Jameson* transports us on the rocket wings of the future to a distant planet, to the LAND OF THE BURNING SEA. In his usual vigorous style Malcolm paints for us a word picture of a Solar System which, though interesting, is not exactly the type of future we like to envision as we Look Forward.

Hence, it is strictly up to us to stand shoulder to shoulder and apply to the entire world that marvelous democratic maxim of "the greatest good for the greatest number" so that our distant progeny will never feel that we have builded in vain.

MR. MYRTLE

BY the bye, in peeking just around the corner in Looking Forward your editor has caught a glimpse of that funny little man mentioned in this department last issue. METEORIC MR. MYRTLE, that interesting brain child of *Bob Arthur*, will be with us. But you will read more about these voyagers elsewhere in this issue!

Right here let us consider the immediate future.

SCIENCE FICTION LEAGUE

HOW many of you readers have almost but not quite yielded to that urge to form a club of science fiction fans in your neighborhood? You might be surprised at the heartiness of the response to this suggestion.

The day is long since past when—as your editor well remembers—a lad had to hide in the hay loft or the attic to read Verne's "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea," or his "The Mysterious Island."

Folks talk science and science fiction nowadays right out on the front porch, while newspapers and national weekly magazines carry science columns and science fiction book reviews. A person utterly uninterested in science today is as antiquated as—as—I have no simile.

(Continued on page 127)

. . . War days are

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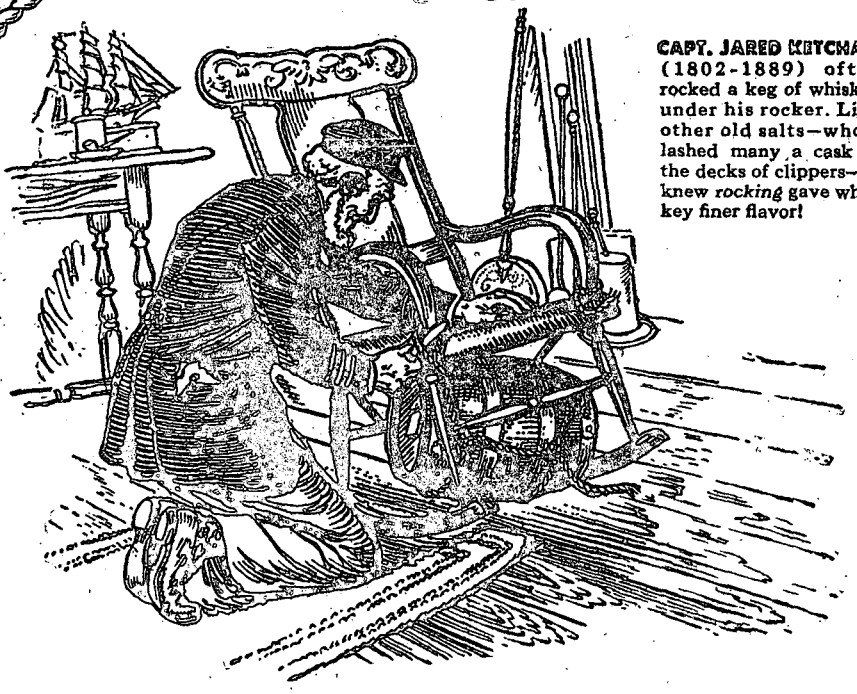

CAPT. JARED KETCHAM (1802-1889) often rocked a keg of whiskey under his rocker. Like other old salts—who'd lashed many a cask to the decks of clippers—he knew *rocking* gave whiskey finer flavor!

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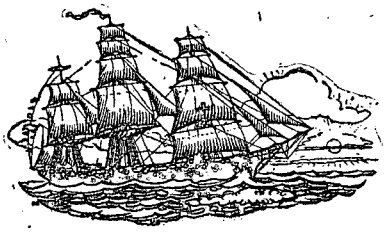

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THUNDER TO VENUS

An Amazing Novel of the Future

By
JOSEPH J. MILLARD

CHAPTER I

The Take-off

THE *Turtle* squatted in her blast-off cradle, old and ungraceful Eternal Venusian fog writhed with tendrils of dirty cream around her bulbous glassite nose, enclosing her stark ugliness and her flaring sides in an opaque shroud.

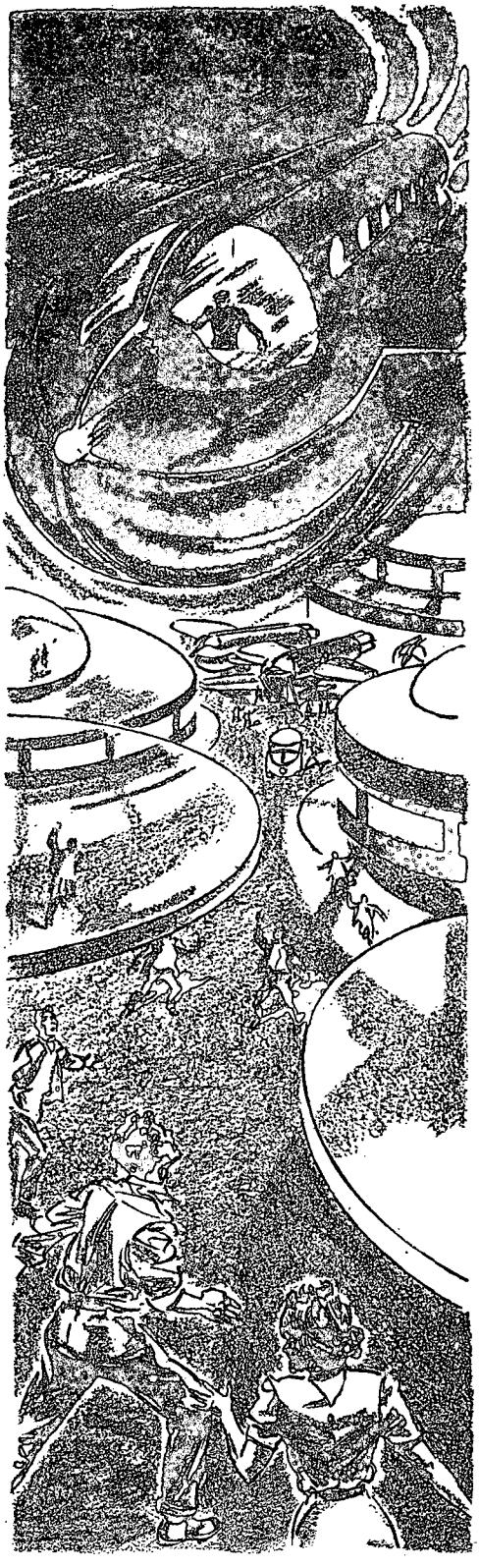
She sat like a poor relation, screened by the fog from the Administration Building and the sprawling acreage of Venus City Spaceport. Once, about eight years in the past, the *Turtle* had been known as the most modern rocket ferry in the System.

Now she was a tub, one of five that made up Trans-Venus Ferries, smallest and least important of Titus Conway's vast spaceline holdings. This subsidiary line bridged the nine-hundred-mile fogbound swamp between Venus City and Swampedge, on the South Highland.

Technically, the *Turtle* was the CC-4, also known to the disillusioned pilots of the line as Conway Coffin Number Four. Designed and constructed on Venus to fly the soupy Venusian atmosphere, she was not a spaceship and had never seen the sun. She was simply an ugly, utilitarian old ferry boat.

But to Lane Shannon, standing high on the pilot's catwalk like a disembodied spirit in the fog, she was the most beautiful craft ever flown. She was his first command.

Ignoring the eternal drip and the steamy heat, Lane Shannon stood stiff and proud outside the control cabin,



Anderson's rocket ship roared into the spaceport. (Chap. VI)

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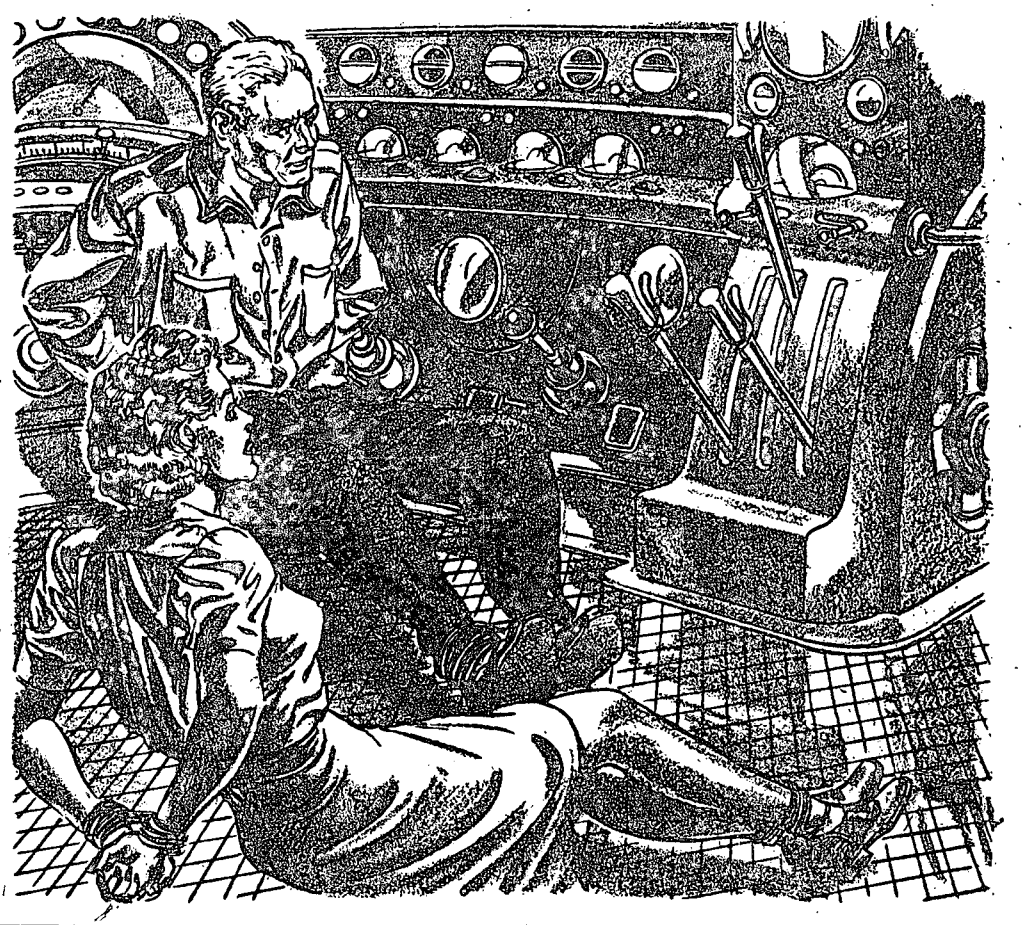
looking down at the line of passengers who materialized out of the fog to vanish into the big hulk. *Vro* planters and their families, salesmen, buyers, inspectors: all were bound for the culture plantations on South Highland. All were entrusting their lives to Lane Shannon's skill and ability.

Not bad, Shannon thought, grinning. Not bad at all for a young guy of twenty-five, fresh from a junior berth on a Lunar freighter. And six months from now he'd be given full command of a big Conway cargo ship on the Earth-Venus run. This ferry line was the intermediate step, the proving ground for Conway captains of tomorrow.

Beyond Shannon, shadowy inside the control cabin, Tubby Martin, maintenance chief, was completing tests, hand-pumping each plunger of the multiple throttle bank. Down at the *Turtle's* tail, mechanics in glistening rubberoid coveralls were watching as each individual tube spat its tongue of flame into the inverted cup of a Johnson Repulsometer, to test for proper pressure.

A whistle bleated, its echoes swallowed by the thick mist. The last passenger ducked into the hull and the gangplank rode eerily away. Down below, mechanics wheeled the Repulsometer away and ducked for the protection of the splash-awnings.



An Ace Pilot Suddenly Returns to Call for

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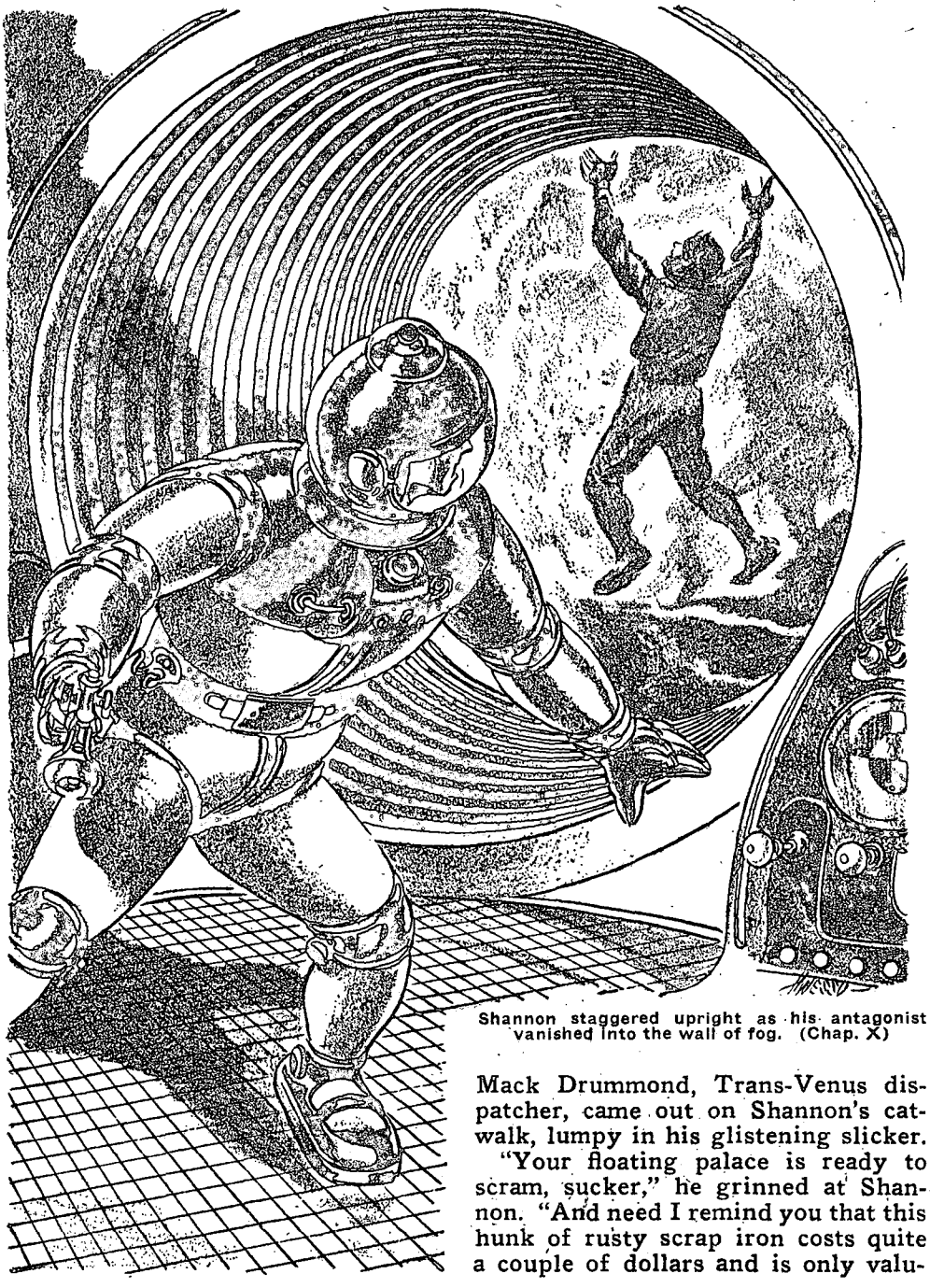
Shannon and Banishes Him from the Spaceways!



Shannon staggered upright as his antagonist vanished into the wall of fog. (Chap. X)

Mack Drummond, Trans-Venus dispatcher, came out on Shannon's catwalk, lumpy in his glistening slicker.

"Your floating palace is ready to scram, sucker," he grinned at Shannon. "And need I remind you that this hunk of rusty scrap iron costs quite a couple of dollars and is only valu-

a Grim Showdown in the Trackless Void!

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able when fully assembled in one piece. Treat it kindly. A dollar doesn't mean a bit more to Titus Conway than his right eye, both arms and his only daughter."

"I'll treasure it," Shannon chuckled, half seriously, and reached for the sign-out book. "Any special orders?"

"Nope. Except to keep the high trajectory over Moulin Range. Besides fifty-three paying passengers and five dead-heads, you're hauling eighteen caterocket tractors on the keel flat, which is about ten thousand pounds' overload. And don't get excited if the beam cuts out on you a time or two.

"Old 'Tight-Pants' Conway'll spend a million bucks to steal somebody's freight line legally—but try and get the fifty bucks I need to repair my transmitter! If the beam dies, just hold your course and it'll come back as fast as I can fix it."

"Okay," Shannon nodded. "But try not to cut me out over Morgreb Gap. That cross-wind through there must hit at least three hundred miles an hour."

TUBBY MARTIN, climbing out onto the walk beside them, made a grimace.

"Three-twenty, measured velocity," he growled. "And how these crates will drift when that crosswind hits 'em! Your motors check okay—by Conway standards, which ignore a little matter of eight per cent pressure loss on Number Four Ring and tubes a thousand hours overdue for grinding."

"How's my mush?" Shannon asked.

"Rotten," Martin said flatly. "Every other outfit in the System has switched to that new High-X Superfuel. When they threw out their old Standard mush, Conway bought it up at a bargain and we're stuck with it. It's five years old, lumpy and full of mush-bugs.

"But what's that against a dollar-ten-a-hundred discount? If a lump clogs your main jet feed, you'll be hunting for the bottom of Bottomless Swamp. Good luck, anyhow," he added sourly.

"Thanks." Shannon opened the door to the control cabin.

"How's the fever now?" Drummond asked seriously. "Did you do what I told you to?"

Shannon nodded. Recovering from the usual newcomer's attack of Venus fever, he still suffered occasional spasms of wracking chills.

"Yeah. I slipped back of your communibeam panel and took a healthy snort of *bak-bak*, as you suggested. Man, that's liquid fire!"

"Okay. But I hope none of Conway's spotters saw you. He loves to fire pilots for drinking on duty, because then the law gives him the right to snatch their pension fund. Well, happy blasting, sucker."

Still grinning, Shannon dogged home the glassite port, glanced over his controls and settled himself into the pilot's bucket. Drummond and Martin vanished into the fog, followed a moment later by the retreating catwalk. On the control board, a buzzer whirred and a red light glowed. Shannon cut in the ignition and felt the shudder as the tubes fired. He idled them a moment, waiting.

The buzzer stopped and the red light turned to green. With excitement tightening his throat, Shannon shoved in the Bolton bar that simultaneously depressed the thirty-six individual tube throttles. With a roar of choked thunder, the big ferry seemed to crouch, trembling, and then hurl itself up into the wall of fog. They were off—off on the maiden flight of Lane Shannon's first command.

* * * * *

The sharpest thrill wore off in half an hour. There was really nothing to do. The beam-activated robot pilot handled controls, maintaining course and altitude. There was no scenery to watch, nothing but eternal dirty fog on all sides.

Shannon yawned, slid open the control room door and looked down at his passengers. Fifty-eight people sleeping, visiting, reading with calm confidence in their pilot.

He turned back, grinning to himself—and the whole picture had changed. The fog, no longer meeting the rocket ferry head-on, was whipping furiously

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across the *Turtle's* path, slashing wetly at the glassite nose with a force that rocked the ship. The soft whine of the beam signal was suddenly rising and falling as the old tub yawed off course and was constantly jerked back by the robot.

"Morgreb Gap," Shannon whispered. "Beam, don't fail me now!"

He laid a sensitive hand on the manual controls, ready to take over in an instant. There would be two hundred

Too long to be encircled, Morgreb Gap had to be crossed for regular service between Venus City and the South Highlands. A mad maelstrom, where incredible winds yelled through the swamp and the jutting rocks. Where no human foot had ever trod. Where, so far, thanks to the fear-born skill of Conway pilots, no ferry had ever landed.

Shannon sat tensely, remembering everything his instructor had taught

miles of this howling fury, then quiet again beyond Moulin Range.

HIS mind pictured the two-hundred-mile chasm, gaping a thousand miles across the face of Venus, dividing the horrors of Bottomless Swamp from the unclimbed heights of Moulin Range. A gigantic funnel that gathered all the roaring winds of one hemisphere and hurled them shrieking across to the other.

him on the previous guided trip to acquaint him with his new run. There wasn't anything to do, actually, unless the beam died—

It did! With no warning at all, the drone signal blanked out and the controls bucked under Shannon's hand. Deprived of its invisible track, the ship screamed off on a wide tangent, driven by the wind, fog shredding away before its nose.

Shannon knew a moment of icy

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panic. Then he was hunched in the bucket, fighting the controls, kicking the left nose-jet bar to swing back onto the lost course. Eventually, flying by instruments, he could find and hold the narrow channel of the pass. But long before then, the broken transmitter should be repaired, taking over the job for him. Nothing to worry about yet, beyond some lost time—

And then the stern rockets went dead!

They stuttered, blurped, fired spasmodically for a few seconds and then quit cold. Tubby Martin's fear of a clog in the feed line, due to lumpy mush, had been justified. Deprived of driving force, the big ferry slanted down, pitching and rolling as the wind clawed at its atmosphere vanes.

With his throat dry, Shannon jazzed the Bolton bar with his right hand while his left pumped frantically at the emergency ignition booster, building up an arc that would flame through the obstruction and clear the feed line.

They were tail to the wind now, screaming down Morgreb Gap, losing altitude. The booster arc cut in, flamed, heated the lump of age-hardened fuel to incandescence. The stern tubes blew out the clog with a thunderous roar—and the tail wind caught the flaming gasses and drove them back into the tubes.

With a single, shuddering rumble the whole rocket assembly blew out.

In the screaming silence that followed, Shannon heard the frightened cries of his passengers blending with the storm's banshee wail. Someone pounded on the locked control cabin door and a man's voice, hoarse with terror, bawled incoherent questions. A woman's scream lifted shrilly as the ferry, out of control, lurched into a side roll.

Shannon ignored the cries, wrestling furiously with the sluggish air-vane levers. Though the big wings were designed only as auxiliaries, to take some of the load off the rockets, they did enable Shannon finally to stop the roll and achieve a steep glide. Beyond that, there was nothing to do.

Fog misted the glassite panes. Panting and sweating, Shannon slid one open, taking the beating fury of the hot vapor in his face as he tried to look ahead.

THANK heaven, the wind was astern! To have opened the port while facing that steaming hurricane would have been suicide. As it was, Shannon was nearly suffocated but he had to see—to try to see—what the fogged panes concealed.

A crash was inevitable. But if he could glimpse the nature of the ground in time, he might ease the impact with still-usable nose jets. The initial momentum of the big craft had carried them beyond the center of Morgreb Gap and the gale was less violent now.

Suddenly a wall of darkness loomed ahead. For a moment Shannon thought it was a rock escarpment and braced for a crash.

Then they plowed into it and he saw that it, too, was fog. But like no fog he had ever seen. It was a dark, ugly green, thick and oily, pouring sluggishly up from some fissure in the weird land below. It swirled around the ship, clinging with thick, sensate fingers. It boiled in through the open observation pane before Shannon could slam the panel. It crawled, thick and alien and vaguely sweet, over Lane Shannon's face and into his nostrils.

There was an instant of swirling, nauseous darkness. The pilot's seat under Shannon tilted sharply, pressing him back, and then fell away. He felt the ship strike solidity with a jarring impact, slow and grind to a halt.

He opened his eyes and something was wrong. Everything was wrong. Nothing was the same. The seat beneath him, those little round ports where glassite panels had been a moment before, the cabin walls, the spidery limbs of a landing cradle stretching up outside—they were all different.

He looked down—

And he wasn't in the CC-4 at all! This was the tiny ten-passenger lifeboat and he was in it alone!

Lane Shannon choked, caught at the seat rail, fighting the whirling blackness that clawed at his throbbing brain. He was dimly aware that be-

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hind him the port door was being pried open, that figures were crowding the opening.

From a long way off he heard the voice of Mack Drummond.

"It's Four's lifeboat, all right, but—*Heaven above, it's Shannon!*"

They crowded in, catching him, lifting him from the seat.

"Lane! Lane! Are you all right? What happened? Where's the ship? What happened to your passengers?"

Shannon found a fragment of voice. "Wh-where am I?"

"Why, back at Venus City Spaceport!" Drummond exclaimed. "But where have you been for the last five weeks?"

CHAPTER II

Branded

THEY put Lane Shannon in the Venus City hospital. Trans-Venus paid the bills. Trans-Venus also supplied the best nurses and doctors, gave Shannon a private suite and treated him like a royal invalid. Though beyond weakness and mild shock, he seemed in excellent health.

This wasn't like Trans-Venus or Titus Conway at all. Generosity was not a Conway failing. Five days' sick leave for a fractured skull would be more in character.

It took Shannon several days to realize what they were doing to him.

They gave him a lot of time alone. Time to think about what had happened. Time to realize that, somehow, five weeks had completely vanished out of his life. Incredibly, time had telescoped itself for him and the most important period of his life was missing.

One moment he had been landing in the CC-4. The next moment he *had* landed—but in a lifeboat, five weeks and four hundred miles away. There wasn't even a recognizable gap in his memory, beyond that moment of blackness when he braced himself for the crash.

Several times a day men came to ask questions and listen, while Shannon repeated his story. Search ships were still combing Morgreb Gap for the wreckage and the bodies of fifty-eight passengers they felt sure must have died in the crash. The search was hopeless. Fog prevented visual observation, the swamp was impenetrable on foot, and mineral deposits underneath blocked the use of detectors sensitive to metallic ores.

Day after day they came to Shannon, asking the same question but wording it differently, so that for some time he did not suspect what they were really doing.

Finally he understood.

"Confound you!" Shannon shouted furiously. "Are you trying to imply that I know where the wreck is and won't tell? Do you believe I'm responsible for the crash, that I'm afraid to let you find it and discover proof of something I did wrong? Do you think—"

The questioners rose to leave. One was Jacobson, inspector for the Department of Interplanetary Commerce. The other was Ivan Morse, one of Titus Conway's technical stooges.

"What we think doesn't matter, Shannon," Morse said stiffly. "The Board of Inquiry, meeting tomorrow, will hear the evidence and decide where the blame lies. Our only interest was in saving—in trying to save—fifty-eight human lives. But if you won't help—"

* * * * *

The official inquiry was a farce and a mockery. The board, with Jacobson, the IC man, as chairman, consisted of six pliable little puppets, who danced and bowed and nodded whenever Titus Conway pulled the strings.

Conway himself flew up for the trial. He sat with his stooges behind an ornate Venusian *kao*-nut table, a gaunt and gray-haired giant with mean lips and hard, shrewd eyes. A predatory vulture, Conway. An uncrowned king, who ran the inquiry as he had always run everything money could buy.

Morse, Conway's spokesman at the inquiry, summed it all up very neatly.

"Gentlemen, you have heard the evidence presented. You have heard medical experts testify that Lane Shan-

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non showed no trace of brain injury in either shock or damaged cortex—which would account for a form of amnesia absolutely unknown to medical science.

"You heard, and Shannon has admitted, that he took a drink of powerful liquor just prior to the ill-fated blast-off. How big a drink, or how many, we do not know. We do know that the alibi of Venus fever, like the old-fashioned snakebite, is too often merely an excuse for drunkenness.

SHANNON glared at him in futile protest.

"You have heard the insinuation that Trans-Venus was responsible for the crash, because of alleged beam failure and inferior fuel. Gentlemen, as to the beam failure, you have just heard testimony proving that the beam was off exactly four and one-half minutes—not long enough to endanger a ship in the hands of a competent pilot.

"As to the fuel, the charge is ridiculous! Standard-X mush, while admittedly second to the newly-developed Super-X, was nevertheless good enough to power the ships that discovered and colonized these worlds. It was, for five years, the only fuel used by the major spacelines of the System.

"Standard-X has been amply safe in the shells of Trans-Venus ferries—until Lane Shannon came along. Need I say any more regarding this insult to your intelligence?"

The verdict was no surprise to anyone, least of all to Lane Shannon when he faced Inspector Jacobson at the end.

"Shannon," the IC man said, speaking slowly so the newsbeams could pick up every word, "there is not one iota of concrete evidence to *prove* that you were intoxicated when you blasted off the CC-4 with a load of passengers and freight.

"There is no evidence that you, through criminal negligence, caused the loss of that ship and its entrusted lives; no evidence that you deliberately affected your own escape at the expense of the passengers you left behind—or that you let them die rather than reveal the location of the wreck."

He paused, glancing toward Titus Conway for approval. Shannon was too stunned to protest.

"Because there is no concrete evidence," Jacobson continued, "you are facing a private inquiry instead of criminal prosecution, Lane Shannon. Later you will face something infinitely worse—the finger of hatred and scorn leveled at you by the peoples of the Solar System.

"We, here, have no power to administer fitting punishment. We can only act within our sphere, in the best interests of space travel and the public we serve. It is with that goal and those limitations in mind that we render our decision," Jacobson purred hypocritically.

"You, Lane Shannon, will hand over to this board your pilot's license and rocket emblem. Unfortunately, you will leave this room in a moment, a free man. But never again, as long as you shall live, will you be permitted to pilot a flying vehicle of any kind—either for yourself or others, through space or through atmosphere.

"That is the verdict of this board. Have you anything to say, Lane Shannon, before the inquiry is adjourned?"

Lane Shannon shook his head slowly. Then he laughed. It was not the laugh of a young fellow of twenty-five. He laughed and it was Titus Conway's red-veined eyes that shifted away.

Still laughing softly, Shannon slapped his license tab down on the table. He unpinned the tiny moon-metal rocket emblem, a miniature stern-tube assembly, from his lapel and laid it beside the license.

Then, head erect, shoulders back and laughter still bubbling mockingly from his thinned lips, Lane Shannon walked out into the thick eternal Venus fog.

CHAPTER III

Gift of Trouble

IT WAS an old building and not too well sound-proofed. Standing in the small, barren reception room, Lane Shannon could hear all the multitu-

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dinous noises of the great Earth terminal, muffled but not deadened by the ageing walls.

Subconsciously, his ears caught and sifted the familiar sounds. The rhythmic *slup-wheeze, slup-wheeze* of hydraulic pistons lifting a blast-off cradle. The dreary, endless drone of multiple jet-grinders chewing at the encrustations on the inside of a tube assembly: stern tubes as indicated by the deep, hollow *whoo-oo-oom* of the diamond wheels.

Somewhere across the blast-pitted cup of the spaceport, a Marek training rocket roared monotonously up and down its cable with a rookie pilot in the bucket seat. The sound pervaded everything, even the filtered air of the office and the acrid incense of mush as it was pumped into fuel shells by a crew of "jet-monkeys," or maintenance men.

From the nearby dispatcher's tower, a whistle shrilled the "stand-away." A moment later a rocket blasted off with a thunder that shook the very foundations of the building. Shannon threw back his head, staring blindly at the cracked ceiling, his ears following the thin scream of the projectile's flight until it dwindled to nothingness. For a moment his face was twisted, bitter, a sneering mask around the pain in his eyes.

When he looked down again, the girl was there.

She had come out of an inner office to stand quietly by the chrome railing, slim and cool and unbelievably graceful, completely feminine yet calmly capable. Shannon blinked at the vision of chestnut hair framing a slender, vital face. Unaccountably, he felt his cheeks burn at the impact of level gray eyes that took him apart, weighed him, analyzed his motives.

He steeled himself and bowed curtly.

"How do you do. I am—"

"I know," she said quietly. "You're Mr. Shannon, the new owner of Venus Freight Line. Come in. I'm Marla Wylie. I was private secretary to Mr. Leverance, the former owner here, until he—until his death."

"Oh!" Shannon looked at her with renewed interest. "The agents who handled the sale told me to listen to you. They said you really ran the business. Knew more about interplanetary freighting problems than anyone else here."

"I'll help all I can." Something in her tone made Shannon feel like a spanked child. "Mr. Leverance was ill so much these last two years that a great deal of the management fell to me."

Shannon followed her through the gate in the railing and stopped, staring around the barren room. A few files, a table loaded with dusty records, three desks standing empty and unused—that was the equipment. Only the reception desk and visiphone switchboard by the railing showed signs of recent occupancy. Probably, Shannon thought, that was Marla Wylie's post.

Four private offices opened off this larger room. Two of them had solid walls and ground-glass doors. One was unmarked. The other bore the single word "President" under a smear

[*Turn page*]

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where the name of the former owner had been inexpertly scraped away.

The other two offices were visible through open glassite partitions. In one, Shannon saw a small, dark-faced man peering out at him from a maze of etherad, communibeam and telewire equipment. Gold leaf on the door read: "Communications — Allen Spaine."

Adjoining this was a larger office with two solid walls covered by blueprints, rocket diagrams and typed lists. According to the door legend, the thin, bald, space-bronzed man behind the littered desk was "M. Killmer, Operations Manager."

MARLA WYLIE interrupted Shannon's inspection.

"Venus Line," she said, "was neither large nor prosperous. I guess you knew that when you bought it from the estate at such a ridiculous figure. Dad—I mean, Mr. Leverance, tried to keep what equipment he did have as up-to-date as possible."

"Dad?" Shannon arched his brows in surprise. "Was he your — your father?"

"No. John Leverance was simply 'Dad' to everyone who knew him. He" —there was an almost imperceptible catch in her voice—"he was a fine, fierce, lovable old man. He had a dream, but this was as far as it ever got. He wanted to see Venus Lines the nucleus of a whole interplanetary freighting service—a second Spaceways Express. He—"

She broke off suddenly and the fire died out of her eyes.

"You'll want to meet the other employees," she suggested listlessly.

"Later." Shannon waved his hand. "I want to know more about the setup first. Tell me about them."

"Mr. Spaine, there, handles communications, maintains contact with our ships, coördinates our schedules with those of the field dispatcher and relays interplanetary conditions to our customers. It's a two-man job anywhere else."

"Sounds like it," Shannon admitted, conscious of the sneering hostility on Spaine's thin face beyond the glassite partition. "Who else?"

"Mike Killmer is chief pilot and operations manager. His responsibility is to maintain schedules and keep ships flying. Of late, he's handled traffic management, too."

"How many pilots?"

"Three — now. Marquard has the G-two at Venusport this week, picking up a load of benrusite. Anderson was to blast off from Lunopolis this morning with a load of farm implements for the Venus Highland farmers. He'll bring *Vro* leaves back on the return trip. He's flying a new 'Heavy Six', our newest and best ship.

"Ohrbeck is on the schedule board to blast off with a load of Farnham beryl drills for the Moon mines as soon as his G-three is overhauled. He's around somewhere now. Probably down in the cradle house, fighting with Tubby Martin, our maintenance man."

"Martin?" Shannon barked, wheeling around with a new flame in his eyes. "Tubby Martin, did you say?"

"Why, yes. He's anxious to see you, I believe."

"Tubby Martin." Shannon whispered again to himself and his eyes clouded. "I wonder—" He dismissed the problem. "I'll dig him out later. About Venus Freight, were those you mentioned all the ships the outfit owned?"

"All the company operated. There's another old G-ship racked behind the cradle house for emergencies, but it's so old the meteor screen won't stay on. All except the big G-six are old and slow, but they were all Venus could afford and—"

"Never mind," Shannon cut her off, his eyes glittering. "They're exactly what I need. Exactly." He nodded briskly at the former owner's office. "Let's go in there. I'd like to see the operating statements and ask some more questions."

He followed the girl through the ground-glass door into a small, bare private office. The carpet on the floor was old and faded, the littered desk scuffed and worn. The only new thing in the office was a large three-dimensional portrait of a grizzled, square-jawed old man. Shannon scowled at the portrait.

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"Who's that?"

"Dad—Mr. Léverance. When he died, the employees had that portrait made. It—was like having him around. We didn't know what would become of Venus Freight Line then. I'll have it taken down immediately, Mr. Shannon."

SHANNON had been about to order the uncomfortably lifelike picture removed. Suddenly, for no accountable reason, he changed his mind.

"Don't. Let it stay where it is."

He turned away, stamped to the daylight window, pressing the stud that turned the polarized panes to transparency. Warm sunlight flooded in and he could see the whole west end of the rocket field spread below.

A quarter of a mile away, around the curve of the railed walk that circled the blast-off cup, spectators were watching a Lunar ferry load. Beyond that, a great silver dome glistened under the sunlight, the conditioning chamber where incoming passengers on the Martian liners were slowly accustomed to terrestrial atmosphere and gravity. A red-checkered flag, hanging limply over the dispatcher's tower, warned of meteor swarms drifting inside the Lunar orbit.

Everywhere Shannon looked, men were busy making reality out of mankind's oldest dream. He'd shared that dream once, had been on the way toward contributing his part to the saga of far worlds. Now that was gone, ruined, smashed forever by one man's unconscionable greed.

The old bitterness came back into Shannon's eyes, twisted the natural good humor off his lips. He snapped the stud again, blotting out the aching scene. He had what he had wanted, now—what he had worked and slaved and dared death for, after three bitter years. But something was wrong, something that spoiled the first thrill of triumph.

Something he could not put a finger on.

He turned sharply. The operating statement and audit figures lay on the desk, ready for his inspection. But Marla Wylie stood there, her back to the desk, fingers white against the scuffed rim. There was an expression in her eyes that Shannon could not fathom. Suddenly he thought he had it, thought he knew why she seemed upset.

"I'm sorry," he said briskly. "I guess I forgot to mention an obvious fact. You're staying on, of course. All the staff. And effective at once, you'll all draw a twenty-five per cent increase in salary. Later, when things are—"

"Mr. Shannon," Marla said very quietly, "why did you buy Venus Freight Line?"

"Because I wanted a line and this was for sale at a price I could afford." Shannon hesitated, studying her through narrowed eyes.

"You don't like me very well, do you?" he said suddenly. "You don't like the idea of working for Lane Shannon, the rat who was grounded for life because he—"

"Please answer my question," Marla insisted quietly.

"All right," Shannon snapped. He dropped into the worn chair, leaned knotted fists on the desk. "I'll tell you why I bought it. Three years ago, Titus Conway smashed the only dreams I ever had, cut me off from the only future I ever wanted.

"All my life I'd dreamed of space travel. Nights I'd go out and watch the stars and tell myself that some day I'd be flying up to them, helping establish spacelines to them, fitting into the biggest and grandest adventure mankind ever knew. That was my own personal goal."

He got up and stood with his back to the window.

"I lost that goal. A new one took its place. These past three years I've lived for just one thing—to hand back to Titus Conway just one small measure of what he handed me," Shannon's fists clenched angrily.

"Oh, I thought for awhile that I could beat fate and clear myself, somehow. I saved money and tried to hire a pilot to fly me back through Morgreb Gap. I thought maybe I could find the wreck of the CC-4 and prove that I wasn't to blame. Besides, I was haunted by my own lost five weeks, al-

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ways wondering where I'd been and what I'd done during that time."

SHANNON'S eyes were bitter.

"But that failed. Conway and Trans-Venus couldn't afford to have anyone find the wreck and see what really happened. They bought the Morgreb Gap area and closed it to outside ships—under 'government' order. Got it condemned as dangerous to flying. They rerouted their own run to cross Moulin Range a hundred miles farther west.

"Then I tried to go through on foot. Well, I nearly died in the swamp and the wind. I knew then I was bucking fate. So I gave up and concentrated on the one thing left to me—hitting back!"

Shannon whirled, driving a clenched fist into his palm.

"I can't smash Titus Conway. He owns half the Solar System. What he can't buy, he gets by intimidation and outright theft. His legal staff sits up nights to twist the law so he can get by with murder. I can't smash him—but I can hurt him so he'll never forget it!

"I've made my plans, but that took money. There was only one way for an outcast to get money fast—the Vedalian deposits on Pluto. One man in a thousand who tries to find them comes back alive. One in ten thousand strikes it rich.

"I was that one, Miss Wylie. I nearly died, but hate wouldn't let me. I came back with a small fortune, enough to buy a line that competed with Titus Conway."

"You — you can't match Venus Freight Line against Conway Cargoes," Marla Wylie whispered, white-faced. "These old ships against a fleet of modern freighters — impossible! He only let Venus exist because we were too small to hurt him."

Shannon whirled to face her. He grinned and the expression was a humorless grimace.

"It is a laugh, isn't it?" he said harshly. "Four old tubs against Titus Conway—*the* Titus Conway. Oh, he'll smash me and he'll smash Venus Line eventually—but he'll carry the scars of that fight to his grave."

For a few moments, Lane Shannon had been completely swept away by the fury of his dark ambition. For a few moments he had forgot the sensation of wrongness that had nagged him. Suddenly the sight of Marla Wylie's strained, white face brought it back.

She was standing midway between the desk and the door, facing him, her head up and her eyes blazing a strange, deep fire.

"Mr. Shannon." The very softness of Marla's words made them cut like a knife. "You won't understand what I'm going to tell you, I'm afraid. But I can only try. Please listen to me. Four years ago, Dad Leverance organized Venus Freight Line to crystallize a dream of his own. Most of us started with him then, shared his dream, helped him fight the battle he was never destined to win.

"I don't expect you to understand, Mr. Shannon. I'm not blaming you. But we talked this over when the news of the sale came through, and we guessed you bought Venus for some such purpose.

"We made our decision then. I—I'm tendering my two weeks' notice now. The others will do the same when you're ready to see them. Meanwhile, we'll coöperate all we can to help you get a new staff assembled and functioning. You may ring if you want me."

She went out, closing the door quietly behind her.

Shannon stood rigid for a full minute, staring at the wall. Then he turned and groped his way heavily to the old desk. He knew now what had seemed wrong, what had dulled the sharp edge of his first triumph.

He knew that Titus Conway wasn't the only enemy he faced. There was another—a ghost.

The ghost of John Leverance, who had also once dreamed dreams.

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CHAPTER IV

Rebellion

LANE SHANNON paced the worn carpet, slapping clenched fists against his thighs, fighting to suppress the rage that was building up inside him. Beyond the desk, ten feet away from him, stood the four men who were temporarily his employees.

There was Al Spaine, dark and sneering; Mike Killmer, thin and coldly unfriendly; little "Mitie" Ohrbeck, his boyish face white and tense. Of the four, only Tubby Martin had shaken Shannon's hand. Even his greeting had been strained, almost elaborately casual. He was standing back silently now, his eyes watchful.

Shannon stopped his pacing and leaned white-knuckled fists on the desktop.

"You're fools!" he snarled with blunt harshness. "You can't eat dead dreams. I'm offering twice what you'd make with anyone else—even offering to deposit a year's salary to your accounts in any bank you designate, so you'll know your hay is safe.

"What more do you want? Venus Line is a washout anyhow. You couldn't have kept it going. You'd have ended up slaving for Conway's peanuts, eventually taking what I got. This way, you work a little longer, clear some money and end in a blaze of glory."

"Yeah," Allen Spaine said with carefully cultivated nastiness. "I can dimly remember something about fifty-eight people who probably ended in a blaze—but not of glory."

Shannon flushed, then went white. For a moment he fought the impulse to smash his fists into that dark, sardonic, taunting face. He swallowed with an effort.

"All right." He spread his hands in a hopeless gesture. "The woods are full of spacemen with sense. If you won't stick, you won't stick, that's all. My money will buy a new crew."

"Nothing else would," Mike Killmer drawled. "People don't give loyalty to a heel."

That hurt Shannon, hurt worse than any taunts or insults he had taken in his three years as an outcast. Loyalty to a heel! Was that what he was asking of proud, capable men? He thrust the doubt aside. Titus Conway bought what he wanted with money. While it lasted, Lane Shannon's money was as good.

He whirled toward the silent Tubby Martin.

"How about you? Are you riding or walking, Tubby? I haven't heard the details but I can guess you've no reason to love Conway. You're too good a maintenance man to be throwing in with a bankrupt outfit like Venus, unless you'd been blacklisted among the big companies. That's just one of the tricks of lovable old Titus Conway."

"Right," Martin said flatly. "Mack Drummond and I had an idea maybe a certain kid pilot deserved a break. We sent bottles of that old Standard mush around to some independent testing laboratories, figuring a report on how bad it was might persuade the Board of Inquiry to reopen the probe of the CC-4."

He grinned lopsidedly, without humor.

"The 'independent' labs weren't independent after all," Martin explained. "How could we know Conway owned them, too? We had our choice of crawling on our little pink tummies or getting out. I got out. Mack had a family to support. He crawled. So they split his pay and put him to flying the oldest tub on the Swampedge run."

"I knew you'd play along, Tubby," Shannon said, almost happily. "Maybe we can pull Mack down to take over communi—"

"Hold the jets, Lane," Martin interrupted, his gaze level. "I've been waiting three years to ask one question. Was that amnesia story completely on the level?"

SHANNON'S eyes were as level as Martin's.

"Absolutely, Tubby."

"Okay. I'm glad about that, Lane. Mack and I never knew for sure. Lying to a court or an inquiry board isn't like lying to your friends."

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"Then I can count on you?"

Martin's gaze slid away.

"I don't know—yet. Let me think about it until tomorrow."

"All right." Shannon sat down heavily, waved a hand without looking up. "See me tomorrow, Tubby. That's all, for all of you."

He sat for a long time after the door had closed, brooding at the desktop, plowing trembling fingers through his hair. At last he turned and looked up at the face of the man he had never known—John Leverance. It was a blunt, honest face, with smile crinkles edging the wide eyes and the faintest upward quirk touching the wide lips.

"Confound you!" Shannon whispered fiercely.

He turned, snapped the visiphone. Marla Wylie's voice came on instantly, cool, crisp and impersonal.

"Get me the head of employment over at the Spacemen's Association."

He did not bother to thumb on the televisor screen connection. After a moment a masculine voice came on the line.

"Spacemen's?" Shannon barked. "This is Venus Freight Line. We need some good men and need 'em fast. A traffic expert, a good beam operator who knows dispatching, a couple of pilots— Oh, yes," Shannon swallowed a sudden tightness in his throat, "and a first-class private secretary who knows the interplanetary freight game. We'll pay fifty per cent over the standard salary for the right girl—"

"Hold on," the voice cut in sharply. "Venus Line, did you say? Well, now I'd like to accommodate you, mister. But the fact of the matter is, we haven't any available help right now."

"What?" Shannon roared, strangling the instrument. "Don't give me that tube-wash! You've got fifty men over there, crying for jobs. All right. Seventy-five per cent above—"

"Sorry. Nobody available right now. Try us again in maybe sixty days or so. Now, if you'll excuse me—"

The line went dead. Shannon slammed up the instrument, sat staring at the wall, breathing heavily. The war was on. He'd won the first encounter by snatching Venus Freight Line from under Conway's nose. But it began to look as though Titus Conway was taking the second engagement.

The enormity of the goal Shannon had set for himself began to filter into his mind and to shake his confidence. He had started with a million and a quarter profits from the sale of his Vedalian concession to Pluto Enterprises. Half of this came to him in cash, and most of that went to buy Venus. The second half was due in six months. Beyond that, there was nothing.

Maybe he was licked before he could even start.

"No, by Jupiter!" Shannon swore and slammed a hard fist onto the desktop. "I beat him to Venus and I'll beat him again."

He whirled, thumbed through a ragged directory and called a number. This time he snapped on the televisor screen. Presently it brought him the image of a square bulldog face under straight black hair. The square jaw moved and thin lips parted.

"Mulbach Detective Agency. Hanson Mulbach speaking."

Shannon studied the face for a moment.

"How about it? Has your outfit the nerve to go up against Titus Conway?"

Hard eyes narrowed under jutting black brows.

"How about it?" Mulbach snapped back. "Have you the dough to pay for that kind of nerve?"

"I have."

"Then stop handing out insults and get down to business. My time is valuable."

ELANE SHANNON chuckled mirthlessly.

"Good. Here's what I want. I want a list of spacemen—pilots, maintenance, operations, clerical—whom Titus Conway has ruined. Men he's kicked out on framed charges, blacklisted around the spaceports, men who hate the very air Titus Conway breathes. Men who'd give what little they have left for a chance to hit back at Conway, no matter what the price.

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Shannon grabbed the officer's blast pistol. (Chap. IX)

"I want to know who they are, where they are—and I want them notified that Venus Freight Line is hiring. I want that and I want it in five—no, four days. No longer."

"You might get a fine collection of broken-down has-beens, potential murderers and frustrated rats," Mulbach growled. "When Conway kicks a man down, he kicks him *all* the way."

"Right," Shannon snapped. "That's exactly what I want. Get to work!" He switched off.

A moment later his office door suddenly slammed open and Tubby Martin burst through. The chunky little maintenance man's face was wet with tears, his lips worked wildly and there was plain fury in his brimming eyes. Shannon went around his desk in two strides, caught Martin's coat in hard fists.

"Tubby! What is it? What happened?"

"Mack!" Tubby Martin burst out. "Mack, the best doggone white man in the Solar System! He loved every wire and coil of that mess of junk they called a transmitter, but what did Trans-Venus do? They jerked him out and made him pilot a ferry at half pay. Well, he won't take their kicking around any longer. His ship was overloaded, couldn't clear Nason Peak on the new route over Moulin Range this morning."

"Dead?" Shannon said huskily.

"They took him out in pieces, but he saved their payload. The news-

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beam just brought it through."

Martin jerked away from Lane Shannon's grip, faced him with blazing eyes.

"You want an answer to what you asked a while ago? I'll give it to you—right now! You bet I'm with you. With you and ahead of you. Mack was the best friend I ever had. Give me one good chance to smash Titus Conway and it's all I'll ever ask!"

"Good!" Shannon whirled to his desk, punching the call key.

Marla Wylie appeared in the door.

"I transferred some money to the Venus account this morning," Shannon said. "Start spending some of it. Call somebody and make arrangements for a trust fund to be set up, with regular monthly payments for life to Mrs. Macklin Drummond. Get her address from Tubby. She'll never draw a nickel compensation out of Trans-Venus. That's what Titus Conway hires lawyers for. And there was a child, wasn't there?"

"One," Martin choked. "A boy, going on two years old."

"Include an educational fund for the boy, to see him through whatever technical training he decides on later. And keep my name out of it entirely. Okay?"

Tubby Martin was staring at Shannon, chewing at his lip. Marla Wylie gave him a long, level look that seemed somehow less impersonal than before. She started to leave and suddenly turned back.

"I'm sorry. I almost forgot, Mr. Shannon. There's a call for you. Mr. Titus Conway is calling."

CHAPTER V

Strategy of War

SHANNON'S eyes flashed fire.

"Cut him in," he ordered. "Tubby, sit over there, out of range of the scanner, and don't miss any tricks."

Forcing himself to any icy calm, Shannon thumbed the receptor stud. The screen flickered, cleared. The face of Titus Conway appeared.

Three years had made little change in the all-powerful spaceways tycoon, beyond a deepening of the leathery furrows around his thin lips, a graying of complexion and hair. The restless energy still flamed in the pale eyes, and there was the same electric crackle in his domineering voice when he spoke. He was still Titus Conway, *Rex*.

"What do you want?" Shannon demanded harshly.

"To look at you. I'm always interested in the biggest of everything—even fools." He studied Shannon narrowly, wolfishly, showing food-soiled fangs below the curl of his lip. "You feel pretty puffed up about snatching Venus Freight Line from under my nose, don't you?"

"Yes," Shannon said flatly. "I'm a jump ahead and I mean to stay that way. No one else ever stood up to you and won even the first skirmish. It's an omen. And it proves you're human—and vulnerable."

"So you think you'll take business away from Conway Cargoes on the Earth-Venus run?" the man sneered.

Shannon laughed.

"No. But your heaviest tonnage on that line is in perishable freight—costly *Vro* leaves, *agraba* roots, fresh swamp-fruit and mist-apples. Stuff that fresh is worth more than its weight in gold; spoiled, it isn't worth a Martian *pfeg*. You tell *me* how much of that business you'll hold when word gets out that a below-the-belt freight war is on, with no holds barred!"

From across the room, Shannon heard Tubby Martin's breath sucked in sharply. Titus Conway's face was expressionless, so expressionless that Shannon knew behind the cold mask his brain was whirling furiously, weighing and measuring the impact of the blow.

"Your idea might hurt," Conway admitted at last, "except for one thing. It doesn't matter much to my customers whether a buyer pays for their load or the insurance company foots the bill, so long as they get their money."

Shannon grinned and took his time lighting a cigarette before answering.

"I happen to know you don't hold a majority block of stock in any in-

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surance company," he said at last. "Maybe that's why you aren't so familiar with Department of Interplanetary commerce insurance rules. A company that operates safely and soundly gets coverage at a standard rate. But because of the uncertainties of interplanetary transportation, an outfit that has trouble loses that privilege.

"After three full claims are paid, the premium rate doubles, because then you're no longer considered a safe risk. I took the trouble to find out that Conway Cargoes had two claims adjusted inside the last contract period. One more and your insurance rate doubles."

"All right," Conway growled, breathing heavily. "I can pay it. I'll pay more than that to smash you."

"You will," Shannon agreed pleasantly. "After *five* claims, your insurance is canceled entirely. Forgot that?"

He laughed and blew a thick cloud of smoke at the screen. Instinctively, although miles of distance separated them, Titus Conway blinked in reflex at the spurting vapors. Chuckling, Shannon snapped the switch on that vision—Titus Conway, flinching.

"Lane!" Tubby Martin gasped, mopping his face. "That I should ever live to see the day!"

Shannon mashed out his cigarette, reached up and patted Tubby Martin's arm.

"Half my battle is to keep him worried, Tubby. This is only the beginning. Listen."

HE turned to the visiphone, put in a low-voiced call and snapped on the screen. An obsequious clerk with pencil-line mustache came into view.

"Alderny, Keene and Company."

"Tom Keene," Shannon said. Then, in an aside to Tubby Martin: "The biggest stock brokers in the country. I contacted them yesterday, as soon as I knew my purchase of Venus was airtight."

A thin-faced man came into the screen.

"Ah, how do you do, Mr. Shannon."

"How are you coming on my order to buy all outstanding stock in System Mutual Cargo Insurance Company?" Shannon asked.

"Splendidly. We already have all but a few outstanding shares and we'll get those today. Spaceline Insurance has a wonderful future, but it's still too uncertain for most investors today. They demand more security. I am indeed happy that you—"

"Freeze onto it," Shannon cut in. "There'll be a buying rush on it within twenty-four hours. I'll sell—when the price reaches double what I've paid. Is that clear?"

"Double?" Keene looked startled. "Y-yes, sir. But isn't that expecting a great deal of the market when—"

"Double, or don't sell. And my name must never appear in any transaction. Keep me posted."

He cleared the screen, swung toward Tubby Martin. That individual's eyes were glowing.

"Lane, you're doing it! You've scared Titus Conway into grabbing for control of an insurance company and you're making him finance you to get it. But what if he meets your price and gets control? Then your plan to beat him through insurance costs is blown up."

Shannon chuckled comfortably.

"Not exactly. There's one block of stock frozen where neither Conway nor I can get it. It belongs to a man who's gone on a space expedition and can't be located or reached for a year. Without that block, nobody can secure a controlling interest. I paid plenty to bury that information where Conway won't find it until it's too late, when he's already grabbed my stock.

"I'm rushing him now, not giving him time to dig up all the angles before he acts. That's the essence of my plan—to get him on the griddle and keep him there, hopping like a singed flea."

"Now I *am* scared!" Tubby whispered.

"Why?"

"It just ain't logical, Lane. You're taking Titus Conway, hitting him on three or four fronts and connecting on every blow. Something's bound to go wrong."

Shannon's jaw hardened.

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"Oh, he'll hit back, all right, and hit back hard and dirty," he agreed. "I'm waiting for that. I want him to. Because when he does, then I've a legitimate excuse to turn the wolves loose and take off the kid gloves. So far, I'm only sparring. Wait till we start to fight!"

* * * * *

Shannon stayed in his office through the lunch hour, scrawling endless rows of figures or staring fixedly at the dingy walls. Twice he got up to pace the floor, beating his fists together, whistling softly to himself. He was drunk—intoxicated by the first heady draft of success. He had met Titus Conway and had matched his ruthlessness with a cunning that promised success.

Presently Shannon was sitting behind his desk again, adding columns of figures, when his office door bounced open. Two men came through. One of them glanced casually at him and flipped a beefy hand.

"Hi, friend. Pardon the intrusion. We'll be out of your way in a couple of minutes."

TURNING his back, the man led his companion to the inner corner of the office, brought out a flexilite tape measure and began to stretch it along the wall.

"Now, you tear this old partition out," he said to his companion, "and you can—"

"Hey, hey!" Shannon came around his desk, fists doubled. "What's the big idea of barging in here? This is a private office. What are you doing, anyhow?"

"Doing?" The red-faced man turned around, shoved his hat back off a bald head. "Why, measurin' the joint up for some improvements the boss wants made before he moves in."

"Moves in?" Shannon gaped. "What's the gag? Who are you?"

"Me?" It was the smaller man who answered. "I'm Ben Carlson, of Moon-Tour Lines. I leased this property an hour ago from the guy who owns it—Titus Conway."

He rocked on his heels, grinning at Shannon around the frayed stump of a cigar.

"You'll be cleared out by the first of the week, of course. I'm putting a crew of decorators in Monday morning."

CHAPTER VI

Tooth and Nail

THE words stopped Shannon cold.

"Say—that—again!"

"Sure. I said I leased this property from Titus Conway an hour ago. The lease is air-tight, in case you got ideas, fellow. But all I know is, I've been wanting bigger quarters. About an hour ago, Conway's agent called and offered me this place at a bargain, so I grabbed it. If there's any gripe, see Conway."

"There's plenty gripe," Shannon said through his teeth. "I happen to hold a lease on this property myself. You're trespassing. Get out!"

"I'll handle this, Ben," the beefy man said, nudging his smaller companion aside.

He faced Shannon, holding up fists the size and color of boiled hams, and grinned.

"So we're trespassing, friend. Put us off."

He was about an inch over Shannon's six feet, with at least thirty pounds more beef and bone than Shannon's lean one-seventy. He was also fast for so big a man. But not quite fast enough.

Shannon slid under a sizzling haymaker, buried his left fist in a paunch that hadn't had time to set itself, used his right to mash an already shapeless nose. The big man rocked back, trying to get breath enough to roar. When the roar came, Shannon was there to drive it back down his throat, along with a couple of teeth.

The big man went away from Shannon, walking on his heels, shaking his head with bewilderment. No one had ever told him what a couple of years of fighting for life on Pluto does to a man's muscles and reflexes.

He tried filling the air with aimless fists. A few connected but Shannon rolled with the worst ones, robbing

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them of a satisfyingly solid impact, though his face gradually began to change shape and color under the blows. The big man could have smashed him any time if he could only have caught his breath. What little he did get, whistled like a carboned tube. It wasn't much, because Shannon concentrated on his middle.

Drawn by the commotion, Al Spaine and Mike Killmer came barging through the door, in time to see the smaller man, Ben Carlson, gripping a chair and maneuvering for the back of Shannon's head.

Al Spaine, being nearest, hit him first. The smaller man went down and his companion fell on him. Neither one showed any great eagerness to get up and resume hostilities. At a gesture from Shannon, they got as far as hands and knees and made a distinctly ungraceful exit.

Shannon fell against his desk, panting.

"Thanks," he told the little communications man.

"Go to the devil!" Spaine said coldly. "I'm just not like you. I don't want to see everybody I dislike mopped off the earth."

He turned and stalked out. Mike Killmer, following, stopped in the doorway long enough to eye Shannon critically.

"You better go over to the field hospital and let Doc Seitz shove that face of yours in the de-coagulator for twenty minutes. If I've got to work here another two weeks, I'd like outsiders to think you're human."

Shannon snorted, sank into his chair behind the desk, got his clothing straightened, his cut face mopped somewhat and his hair combed. Then he rang for Marla Wylie. She came in, her attitude still impersonal.

"I think we lost a trick," Shannon told her. "Who's the landlord of this property?"

"The Henry Welsh Estates, managed by Ernst and Kummer."

"Not any more, I'm certain of that. How much back rent does Venus owe?"

"Why, none." She looked startled. "Mr. Leverance always managed to meet the rent within the current period. This current month hasn't been paid yet, but this is only the eighth of the month and—"

"I knew it," Shannon groaned. "Bring me the lease—fast!"

HE motioned for her to wait while he read the document. At last he slapped it down on the desk disgustedly.

"Tubby warned me to be sure my own back fences were tight. We're stuck. A joker in the lease gives the landlord the right to evict a tenant whose rent is more than seven days past due. Ours was due on the first. This is the eighth."

He stared at the wall, thinking furiously.

"Know of any property, for rent around the field?"

Marla Wylie shook her head.

"I'll check on it, if you like."

"Go ahead. But there won't be. Dollars to mush, Conway's grabbed every available space. And it would take us months and cost a fortune to build and equip a private field somewhere else."

"Then — then that means you're through? With no base of operations, you can't operate ships."

"No, it doesn't mean I'm through!" Shannon said violently. "It means I've got to think fast, that's all. There's a way out somewhere. There's always a way out if you can find it—"

"Mr. Shannon," Marla interrupted. She had risen, stood facing him tensely across the desk. "Why don't you give up?"

"What?" Shannon exclaimed. "Let Venus go smash now, when the fight is just beginning?"

"Not that." Marla shook her head. "I mean, give up this bitter, inhuman purpose behind your fighting. Tubby Martin told us how you outguessed and outmaneuvered Titus Conway this afternoon. You'll do it again after this setback, I know. You have brains and courage, qualities that would earn you a loyalty you'll never buy."

Shannon leaned his bruised chin on his fists and stared at her.

"All right. You tell me what I should do."

"Keep on fighting, but fight for an

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ideal," Marla told him. "John Leverance had one. He saw the Solar System as one big utopian unit, with mankind spreading out among the nine worlds to share the products of the System with one another. He used to look on every ton of freight that blasted off, not as so many dollars' profit in his pocket or from someone else's pocket, but as one more foothold carved out of a rich wilderness.

"You may not believe this, Mr. Shannon, when I tell you that those men out there, Allen Spaine and Mike Killmer and the pilots, don't want to leave. Set up a goal and let them share in it and I'm almost certain—"

"How about you?" Shannon asked flatly.

Marla's eyes shifted away. She started to speak, stopped and looked up over Shannon's head, toward the portrait of old John Leverance who had had a noble vision.

Shannon got up suddenly, so abruptly that his chair slammed over backward.

"Never mind. I get it." He faced the girl, letting the bitterness slip out onto his battered face. "You think John Leverance had any copyright on that dream? I had a future once, too. But I lost it. It's up on Venus, somewhere under the fog and the wind, tangled up in a pile of rusty metal and broken bones.

"Go find that lost future, if you want me to believe in Santa Claus. Get me back the right to fly again, if you want me to care whether other men fly."

He stopped, drew in a deep breath. The flames died out of his eyes.

"I'm going over to the field hospital," he said huskily, "to get these bruises rayed out. When I come back, I'll have a way figured out to beat this eviction."

He went out, slamming the door. He did not look back again at Marla's white, strained face. Lane Shannon knew that if he looked at her again, just then, he might weaken.

RETURNING from the hospital, his face almost normal from the de-coagulator lamps that had dissolved and floated away the dark blood from bruised veins and capillaries, Shannon saw that something was wrong the moment he entered the building.

Tubby Martin had returned and, with the other men and Marla Wylie, was crowded into the tiny Communications Room. They were watching the televisor screen over Al Spaine's shoulder. Shannon could see a sort of dull horror reflected on their faces.

Cold fingers clawed at his nerves. He slammed through the railing, drove into the little room with desperate fury.

"What's wrong? What happened?"

Al Spaine told him, without looking around.

"Your lovely little war kicked back on you, heel. It's getting ready to murder Billy Anderson, the finest spaceman who ever pushed a Bolton bar."

CHAPTER VII

Change of Heart

BEYOND Spaine's stiff, angry shoulders, Shannon could see the glowing screen. It held a face that was strange to him, the face of a youngster, blond and pink-cheeked. He must have been about twenty, alive with the laughter and buoyancy of youth.

But there was no laughter on his face now. It was pale, strained, dotted with glittering droplets of perspiration. Haunted eyes lifted, focused on Lane Shannon.

"You're the new chief, aren't you?" he said huskily. "Then for God's sake, throw your weight around down there. Get the field dispatcher quick and tell him to cut me off the beam."

"Off the beam?" Shannon gasped. "I don't get it. What's—"

"Hurry up!" Billy Anderson choked. "I'm heading for Earth under constant acceleration. Both my braking tubes and steering jets are dead. I can't slow, stop or steer and that beam is pulling me straight down toward the Field Headquarters Building. If I hit it at this speed, I'll

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smash everything and everybody to bits."

"If the beam lets go," Mike Killmer raged, "you'll fly off at a tangent and never see Earth again. The sun'll pull you in before we can catch up with a grappling crew and that'll be the end."

"So what?" Anderson shouted, half in tears. "What's one old ship and one bum pilot against a crackup that would tie up interplanetary commerce for months? Cut—off—that—beam!"

Allen Spaine twisted around, glaring at Shannon. There were tears on his cheeks.

"Go ahead, cut him off. Throw him to the wolves. What's one life more or less when you wipe 'em out wholesale! I hope you're enjoying your war, Shannon. Those tubes blew out because somebody monkeyed with them. You asked for sabotage—and you got it! What do you care who gets killed? You won't be exposing your yellow spine to any real danger!"

Shannon was cold, rigid, barely hearing the furious tirade. His mind was painting pictures, sickening visions. Tons of steel and explosive fuel would smash down, at thousands of miles per hour, on the huge Headquarters structure.

The three or four hundred persons working in the building could be out in time, of course. But nothing could save the priceless records, the nerve centers of control and communication that had taken interplanetary traffic out of the by-guess-and-by-gosh groove and standardized it.

As long as the Lunar beam stayed on, the runaway ship would be inexorably drawn down to the center of the building. The crash might even wreck surrounding structures, the entire field.

But none of these factors loomed as achingly monstrous in Shannon's mind as the white face of Billy Anderson.

Something snapped in Shannon's brain, brought a flame into his cold eyes.

"Get out of that chair!" he roared.

When Al Spaine gaped without moving, Shannon caught him in a furious grip, lifted his slender body and literally hurled it back against Killmer and Tubby Martin. Before anyone could move, Shannon was in Spaine's chair, leaning toward the transmitter.

"Anderson!" he barked. "Get this and get it the first time. How far out are you now?"

"Four hours. But kill that beam, you fool! Another half hour and it'll be too late for me to miss Earth. I'll smash into some city, maybe slaughter a hundred people."

"Shut up and listen! The beam is

[*Turn page*]

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staying on and you're coming into this field—alive. Are your stern tubes cool?"

"Yes, but—"

SHANNON gestured impatiently. "Then grab your emergency tool kit and climb back into the housing," he ordered. "You've got to work fast on this or you're licked. I know the tube assembly on those Heavy Six jobs. Each tube is separately mounted and supported by short V-braces leading to a tube saddle. This saddle is made up of a stack of thin metallite shims, so that if a tube gets out of alignment, it can be shimmed back to true without tearing down the whole assembly. Got that?"

"Yes, but—"

"Shut up! Squirm back there and start knocking shims out of the saddles on one side and wedging them in on the other. Do that with every individual tube on the inner three rings. Let the outer rings alone, but shim every one of the tubes in the inner three as far out of line as you can—but all in the same direction."

"I get it, but— Wait! You mean maybe I can use the inner rings as steering tubes?" Anderson exclaimed.

"Of course. Even if they're only a sixteenth out of line, if they all fire in the same direction and keep firing long enough, you'll turn your ship completely around. It's only a question of having time enough to make the swing. Get going!"

A tight grin eased the strain of Anderson's face.

"I've gone! Stand by for a report."

The screen cleared. Shannon let out his breath in a long whistling sigh, conscious for the first time that he had been holding it until his lungs ached. He sat numbly, staring with dull curiosity at half moons of crimson blood where his fists had clenched, driving nails into the palms of his hands. He was seeing the face of Billy Anderson, turning from agony to hope.

But he was hearing, over and over again, the words of Allen Spaine. You asked for sabotage and you got it. What do you care who gets killed?

He cleared his brain of the bitter words by sheer force of will, drove himself to concentrate on the one slim hope.

Thank God this wasn't one of the older G-class crates, with rigid tube-mounts permanently attached to the tubes by intermolecular lacing. For the first time, Shannon found a reason to be glad that circumstances had made him learn rocket ships the hard way.

Lacking the capital to finance his training, he had earned his way to a pilot's license by working part time in the Ranger Factory, afterward builders of the Heavy Six freighters. He knew the tube-mounting principle on which Ranger success had been founded. But neither he nor the manufacturers had ever envisioned this use of the construction feature.

It was such a desperate gamble. Suppose the blast couldn't be turned far enough to swing the ship in the remaining time. They wouldn't know until it was too late to try anything else.

Suppose the uneven blast pressure burned out the tubes. Suppose, even if the ship could be turned, that setting it down on its tail jets without the aid of steering rockets might prove impossible. Shannon groaned and tore his mind away from the nagging doubts.

"How did this happen?" he demanded. "I thought Anderson blasted off for Venus hours ago."

"He was supposed to," Killmer said. "But Conway cut his freight rate in half this morning and stole every load. There was no sense in going on empty, so I told Billy to come home. He blasted out to mid-point, tried to decelerate and discovered his whole bow ignition had been deliberately smashed. Sabotage—"

"Hi, Chief!" Anderson appeared in the televisor, grinning through a mask of carbon and grease. "I did it. Gained almost an eighth-inch misalignment. I should be able to waltz this crate with a sideblast like that."

LANE SHANNON swallowed the tightness in his throat.

"Good boy," he said. "Now start blasting those rings, but watch tube

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temperature every second. You've got to find the point of highest possible acceleration the tubes will stand, and then use it. Every second counts, because you'll be fighting both inertia and the pull of the beam."

"I get you, Chief."

"And give us fifteen-minute readings on a couple of fixed stars, so we can figure your rate of turn."

Anderson saluted and vanished. After a moment, the receiver brought the growing thunder of the tubes. The sound rose and fell for a time and finally settled to a dull rumble.

"A shade over three-quarter throttle," Anderson reported shortly. "I may have to pull it a time or two to keep the heat down, but I'll keep all I can. Now stand by while I watch stars shift."

"I'll take the figures," Mike Killmer snapped.

After tense moments of listening and figuring, he raised a haggard face.

"We can't be sure on this, but I don't like it. I want to see a measurable safety margin and it isn't there. If he makes it, he'll just make it, and that's all."

"I heard that," Anderson cut in. "I'll keep trying, but if you see I can't make it, let me know in time to kick out the hold-back valves on the feed line. I can at least blow this crate into small enough pieces so they won't hurt anybody when they land."

Behind Shannon, Marla Wylie choked back a sob. Al Spaine was whispering curses in a mumbling monotone. The electric computator clicked and whirred, feeding back figures to check Killmer's data. Ohrbeck was silent, gnawing his fists. Shannon could see Tubby Martin's round face from the corner of his eye. It was white, strained, unnatural.

Tubby Martin wasn't seeing a kid named Billy Anderson. He was still seeing Mack Drummond, smeared out on a mountain on Venus. His best friend.

An hour rocketed past, the minutes slipping through Shannon's clutching fingers. Tension was a solid, aching thing that beat at his brain. He was vaguely aware that someone was clutching his shoulder, kneading it with unconscious ferocity.

A hand set a glass of water before him, and he gulped it without turning to identify the donor. Sweat blurred his vision and when he finally dashed it away, two more precious minutes had fled.

More readings came in. Suddenly Mike Killmer hurled away his computation sheets.

"He can't make it. *He can't!* His time is half gone and he's only swung eighty-three point four degrees. He'll come in at an angle and crash."

Suddenly it seemed as though all the weariness in the universe swept over Lane Shannon. He slumped forward against the transmitter, feeling the strength wash out of nerves and muscles. It was a physical effort to speak and his voice, when it did come, was scarcely more than a whisper.

"No, he won't. He'll make it, now. He's won. He only had to fight halfway. Beyond ninety degrees, the Lunar beam stops fighting him and starts pulling him back into line again. The beam doesn't care which way his ship's pointing, as long as it's in line.

"That was what I figured on. Didn't dare cut him off first ninety degrees to make it easier. If he—lost the beam—he'd never get gack on again without steering jets—"

Everything blurred for Shannon then. He knew dimly that voices were shouting and hands were pounding his back and shoulders. Someone was squeezing his arm, pumping it. Through the blur in his eyes, that someone looked like Allen Spaine, but that couldn't be.

"Easy! Easy!"

SHANNON found his voice at last. "He isn't in the clear until he lands. Someone go tell the dispatcher what's up. Have him clear everybody off the field. Have him cut me in here on the field line.

"When I give the word, tell him to break the beam. Then run like blazes. The rest of you clear out. When the beam lets go, that ship will spray jetblast all over this end of North America, trying to sit down on her tail."

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It was Al Spaine who answered for them all.

"I'll see the dispatcher. But we're sticking this out."

There was no time to argue. Time was leaping toward the crisis. Shannon began to talk quietly, earnestly, calmingly, discussing the problem of landing the big ship, suggesting shifts to increase tail-heaviness. Darkness closed in.

Someone touched the button that rolled back a section of roof, leaving only glassite panes between them and the northern sky.

"I've stopped turning," Anderson said suddenly. And a few minutes later: "Hull temperature rising. That means atmosphere. One way or another, you should see me soon."

"Grit your teeth," Shannon said, "and start decelerating."

THE blast roared in the speaker, spurted and died.

"There he is!"

All saw it simultaneously, a pin-streak of flame crawling fitfully down the black vault of the sky. Anderson came back to the screen, white-faced, dull-eyed, wiping a trickle of blood from his mouth and nostrils.

"I can stop her," he panted. "If my teeth don't fly out the top of my skull."

It was brutal punishment, cramming thousands of miles of deceleration into half a dozen, but Billy Anderson took it somehow and his piloting was superb.

Down! Down!

At a thousand feet they could see the tubes, white-hot pencils of lashing fury, separated from shells of high-explosive fuel only by thin bulkheads. If the landing split those guarding walls, drove the hot tubes into the mush—

"You'll hear me cut out the beam in a second," Shannon said. "Stand ready to give ten seconds' full blast through the bent tubes, to throw the ship out of line with the building. Then come down. And Billy. If you overbalance and come in on your side—"

Anderson found the ghost of a grin.

"I can take it, Chief."

"Then—*Cut beam!*"

The big ship plumed a boiling maelstrom of crimson fury. The blast of it pattered on the glass overhead, seared the upturned faces. There was no perceptible lateral shift but the rocket ship was coming down, beating its wings of flame against the cup of the field, painting the surrounding buildings with its lurid glare.

"Stay level," Shannon prayed. "Stay level."

The night was all flame and thunder, blinding them, battering the universe.

Shannon squeezed his eyes tight against the agony of the flame.

The thunder stopped. There was a sharp, crunching thud, then the heavy clangor of falling metal. But no explosion.

Somehow Shannon was out in the screaming echoes of the night, racing beside Killmer and Spaine and Marla and Tubby Martin. Field lights came on, bathing the dust-wrapped giant. Other men were running toward the crash.

A siren was screaming.

Nobody ran away, Shannon thought. Spacemen don't run away when help is needed.

Figures plunged into the dust and smoke.

There came the rip of protesting metal. Then the figures were coming back.

Not carrying him. Helping him stand and walk between them.

LANE SHANNON heard Marla Wylie sob, heard Al Spaine curse happily. Then he was facing Billy Anderson, a trickle of blood across the youngster's forehead, burns and blisters and a sick whiteness. Internes came running from the ambulance. Anderson opened his eyes, grinned weakly at Shannon. One hand fumbled out, groping.

"Hi, Chief! I made it. You're tops in my book, any day."

Shannon took the kid's hand, fought the lump in his throat as they led the boy away.

Al Spaine moved up beside the man he had despised.

"My tricycle's parked over on traffic level, boss. Can I give you a lift to your hotel?"

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CHAPTER VIII

Disaster

THEY were all in the office when Lane Shannon arrived the next morning. He came in, walking on air. Billy Anderson would be out and flying in a week. A new tube assembly and some patching would put the Heavy Six back in service. And things were changed—

"Good morning," they all said.

But something wasn't quite right—yet. There was a tension, a strain on their faces and in their eyes. Shannon thought he knew what caused it and what to do about it. He had lain awake planning instead of sleeping.

He went through into his own office and sat down behind the desk. It felt more like his own now. The serpentine coils of a newstape lay in front of him, with its uppermost items circled in red crayon. Something about the freight fight that Marla Wylie wanted him to see.

He glanced at the strip without actually seeing it, then crumpled it in his hand. What news could be as important this morning as the news he was about to reveal?

Shannon twisted around to grin up at the face of John Leverance.

"You win," he whispered. "Do you mind if I borrow your dream?"

The portrait of John Leverance seemed to smile.

Shannon snapped the communicator stud.

"Everybody in my office for a talk."

He faced them, the newstape crumpled in his fist. For a moment he was silent, framing his words with care.

"I don't quite know how to say this," he began finally. "Or how you'll take it. But — something happened last night to me. Marla was right. I have no right to smash men and their dreams for a twisted hatred.

"Last night I found a new goal to fight for—Venus Freight Line. I'll keep on fighting, but not for revenge. For the finest little spaceline in the System! I'm going after business—hard and honestly. It won't be easy, because I've got to go back three years and clear my own name.

"But I know now that our little enterprise will win out. On that basis, will you stick and help?"

Nobody cheered. Marla Wylie finally broke the silence with a tight, choked sound that might have been a sob. She whirled to the door, snatched it open and ran blindly out.

Shannon frowned in bewilderment. Nerves, probably. This whole crazy time must have been a terrible strain. He faced the others again.

"You heard how Conway levered us out of our space here at the field. I've hit back on that—by leasing better space where he didn't expect me. On the Moon. We'll leave someone here to maintain a pickup office, and make Lunopolis our headquarters. It's a better location, anyhow.

"Then we'll need new ships. I'm placing an order for four of the newest A-class carriers, giving the factory an assignment of my next payment from Pluto in lieu of cash. And—"

"Hold your bar a minute, Shannon," Mike Killmer said, studying him narrowly. "Is this an act? Or don't you know what that thing you're waving around is?"

He nodded toward the crumpled newstape. Shannon gaped at it, conscious that they were watching him like hawks. Finally he dropped into his chair, smoothed the tape and read the curt lines of the latest news flashes received.

PLUTO ENTERPRISES ATTACKED . . . CONWAY CARGOES IN SURPRISE MOVE CHARGE PLUTO ENTERPRISES WITH MISMANAGEMENT OF MINE EARNINGS . . . DEMAND COMPLETE INVESTIGATION . . . INTERPLANETARY COURT ISSUES INJUNCTION FREEZING PLUTO ENTERPRISES BANK ACCOUNTS PENDING COMPLETE INVESTIGATION OF CHARGES . . . VEDALIAN DISCOVERERS AND INVESTORS HIT BY TIE-UP OF COMPANY FUNDS.

The strip fluttered out of Shannon's

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fingers. He was stunned, shocked beyond coherent thought. He had underestimated Titus Conway's power in the System, and this was the bitter penalty.

HE had a little cash left from his purchase of Venus Freight Line. Two or three thousand, at most. The remainder of the million and a half he had planned for working capital—fighting capital—was frozen on Pluto.

Eventually he'd get all or most of it. But not until Conway's experts had dragged in every known and unknown trick to delay the investigation and final settlement. Meanwhile, his holdings weren't good for even a dollar's worth of credit.

A light burst in Shannon's brain.

"You people—Marla— You thought I knew about this, and was only changing my tactics to recoup some of my loss on freight income. That was why she ran out?"

Mike Killmer answered for them all.

"I guess maybe it was just our turn to be wrong, boss. We'll stick—to what's left."

Tubby Martin made a strangled sound. His face was twisted, streaked with angry tears. His eyes were wild, feverish.

"*I'm* not sticking! Go ahead and haul your freight. Forget Mack Drummond. Slap Titus Conway's wrist and call it a fight, if you want to. Mack was my friend! The rat who murdered him is still walking and breathing and ruling the entire universe.

"Go ahead and send some more men out to be slaughtered by sabotage and rotten mush and overloaded ships! I'll wipe the slate clean *my* way!"

He whirled, sobbing, and raced for the door.

"*Tubby!*" Shannon roared. "Stop him! He's out of his head!"

Killmer and Spaine lunged frantically. The chunky figure sidestepped, kicked furiously and was gone. A door slammed and a tricycle car roared away outside.

"Jupiter!" Killmer picked himself up, white-faced. "There goes murder looking for a place to happen."

"Try to stop him, head him off," Shannon snapped. "I've ordered a crew in to handle packing and moving. There's enough money left for that, at least. Where did Marla go?"

Spaine shook his head.

"Who knows? She said before you came that if you didn't take this new move the right way, she wouldn't be back."

Shannon groaned.

"Try to catch Tubby. I'll keep this end up and put out a hunt for her. Venus Freight Line is just about kicking now, and that's all. One more body punch from Conway while we're disorganized like this and the fight will be over. Get going!"

* * * * *

Spaine and Killmer came back in the afternoon, shaking their heads. Tubby Martin, completely unbalanced by his friend's death and the nerve strain of the night before, could not be found. Shannon, in turn, had been unable to locate Marla Wylie. She had vacated her apartment without leaving a forwarding address.

Despite his gnawing anxiety, Shannon had forced himself to keep a grip on the job at hand. He learned that the full repair bill of the damaged Heavy Six would amount to just under nineteen hundred dollars. When he had written a check, his bank balance was less than four hundred. Not even enough to complete the move to Moon City and meet the next payrolls.

There would be nothing left for overhauls, establishment of a branch office on Earth, equipment of shops and cradle house at Moon City, purchase of fuel reserves.

At the darkest time, Keene, the stock broker, switched in on the visiphone.

"Mr. Shannon. The bid is up three-quarters on that insurance stock and leveling off. Do you still insist we hold it?"

"No!" Shannon roared. "Sell, as fast as you can. Are you sure the holdings are scattered so single ownership won't be suspected?"

"Absolutely, Mr. Shannon. You can trust our judgment."

Shannon cut the switch. Meanwhile they'd been given orders to get off the premises that afternoon.

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AT THREE o'clock a squad of armed deputies moved in. At three-fifteen, Venus Freight Line and its personnel—with the exception of Marla Wylie and Tubby Martin—blasted off for the Moon. They flew Mitie Ohrbeck's overhauled G-3, with Killmer at the controls and all their files and equipment stored in the hold. Ohrbeck himself stayed behind to bring up the Heavy Six as soon as repairs were completed.

They left the old, discarded G-1 on its rack. Despite their desperate need for ships, Shannon ruled it unsafe and ordered it sold for junk. Weakened hull segments caused a constant twisting during flight that cracked off the plastic energy-transferring meteor shield in great chunks. And they needed the few hundred dollars' cash it would bring.

There was one break. Marquard, the pilot whom Shannon had yet to meet, had loaded and cleared Venus City Spaceport before the Conway lid clamped down. He was blasting down to meet them at Moon City the next afternoon. Spaine and Killmer assured Shannon that Marquard, too, would stick with Venus Line. Shannon felt better.

The beam pulled them down into their leased cradle at Moon City Spaceport during the early morning hours, terrestrial time. Moon City itself was a flat, dark blister on the wall of Maurolycus Crater, most of its enterprises stretching deep into the caverns or lined along the great subterranean highways to Stofler and Pitiscus and the Cuvier Crater mines.

The retractable cradle dropped them down into the vast air-conditioned under-pits, into a beehive of activity. The artificial sun was on and repair shops, freight terminals and loading docks were going full blast. A pneumatube car sped them to roomy, comfortable quarters Shannon had leased by televisor before Conway thought of shutting off this area to his enemy. A crew went to work with quiet efficiency, unloading and setting up the equipment of office and shop.

"We've got to locate a new maintenance man," Shannon said sadly. "And a new secretary, too, I guess."

He paced the floor, biting his lips. Al Spaine wandered to a purring news-beam receiver and read the jutting tape. Suddenly he yelped, clawed off the strip and whirled toward Shannon. His eyes were bulging, wild.

"*Shannon!* He did it! The crazy wild man did it!"

Shannon spun around.

"Who? Did what?" he demanded.

"Tubby Martin. Right after we blasted off, he ran wild. Broke into Conway's place, shot down two guards and kidnaped Titus Conway and his daughter. He got clear away and blasted off in our old condemned G-One, with half the patrol ships and I. B. I. men on Earth trying to cut him off."

"Good Lord!" Shannon sagged against the wall, feeling his whole world tumbling around his head. "The poor, cracked— Wait! Call Service to jam new fuel shells in our ship and swing it around for blast-off—quick. I've got to go after him. I know where he's headed, what he's planning to do. And nobody can block him but me."

"Lane! Stop it!" Spaine and Killmer fell on Shannon, pinning his arms, wrestling him back from the door. "You can't fly. You're grounded and the penalty for breaking ground-order is two years on 'The Ball'—two years on Penal Asteroid!"

"Let go!" Shannon demanded, struggling. "I've got to go alone. He'll kill himself and Conway and that innocent girl. I tell you, I know how that warped brain of his is working. I know where he's heading—"

From the doorway, a crisp voice interrupted.

"We're glad to hear that, Shannon. You come on over to Headquarters and give us the dope and we'll do the stopping."

He was a powerfully built man in official uniform, with belt and buckle around his waist, insignia denoting his rank on his shoulder straps and a grayish plastic helmet. His right hand gripped a stubby blast pistol.

Behind him stood two subordinates, similarly uniformed and equally determined.

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"Bentley," the big man said, "and two of my assistants. Interplanetary Bureau of Investigation. The Earth office wants to know what connection there might be between your open war with Titus Conway and this kidnaping by one of your employees. I'm afraid you three are under arrest."

CHAPTER IX

Fugitive Flight

SHANNON'S breath exploded noisely. For a fleeting instant he saw again the white, strained face of Tubby Martin, the crawling madness in his eyes. Madness he, Lane Shannon, had helped nourish.

"Wait!" Shannon pleaded desperately. "You don't understand. Here, let me show you—"

He took a step forward. His hand thrust out, caught the blast pistol, twisted it aside.

"Pile in, gang!" he shouted.

Even as his right hand balled up and exploded against the big I. B. I. man's square jaw, Spaine and Killmer sprang into action. Like a couple of football men, they charged across the room to tackle the other two officers.

As the I. B. I. leader reeled back from Shannon's unexpected blow, to sag to the floor, one of his aides, who had drawn his own blast pistol, threatened to break up the proceedings.

In that desperate moment, Mike Killmer caught him about the legs. The two went down in a fighting, smashing heap, as the gun flew from the I. B. I. man's hand. Killmer swore roundly, grabbed the officer by the throat and bounced his head against the floor. The man's helmet was not enough to protect him. His eyes rolled back dazedly, and Killmer put him to sleep with a hard left jab.

The second officer had meanwhile sidestepped Allen Spaine's lunge. He too tried for his blast pistol. But Spaine spun to face him and grabbed him tightly about the middle. He squeezed, hard, so that the aide's arms were pinioned to his sides, the air whistling harshly from his lungs.

Lane Shannon finished the fight with a looping right uppercut. He caught the man's body as it sagged forward and lowered it to the floor.

"Hold these fellows!" he said, panting, as Spaine and Killmer glanced at their handiwork uncertainly. "Keep them quiet until I've cleared the cradle. If an alarm gets out now, I'll shoot my way clear. And listen to me! I'm going after Tubby.

"If I fail to stop him, I won't be back and Venus Freight Line will be yours — yours and Marla's and the others."

"Well," Mike Killmer roared at him, "what are you hanging around here gabbing for?"

"Twenty minutes," Shannon snapped. "I've got to have twenty minutes to blast clear. You call Service about the ship."

He ran out the door, forced himself down to a brisk walk when he reached the street corridor. It would never do to draw attention by running. The street might be crowded with I. B. I. men. There might already be guards on their ship to prevent escape.

At a corner, Shannon snatched out coins, fed them into a humming news machine and grabbed at the latest tape. He read it without slowing, catching the items with anxious eyes. Tubby Martin had vanished. The G-1 had been unguarded. No one remembered that Venus Freight Line kept it fueled for emergency use. As a consequence, Martin got it away before other ships could blast off. Once beyond atmosphere, blasting free of the beam, he had the whole vast emptiness of space in which to elude discovery.

Once upon a time, Shannon thought wildly, another poor devil as much of a fool as himself got into a mess like this. A guy named Frankenstein, who built a monster he couldn't control.

A guy named Frankenstein—

Shannon knew that he had to be right. There was only one place for Tubby Martin to go, only one vengeance that would satisfy his mad hatred. Back to Venus, to cloud-filled, wind-battered Morgreb Pass, and towering Nason Peak in the Moulin Range, where Mack Drummond had lost his life but saved his pay-

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load. A rocket splitting the wind, roaring down under full blast. A peal of mad, triumphant laughter above the thunder.

Then the end. The crash on Nason Peak, where Mack Drummond had crashed. Tubby Martin, Titus Conway, his daughter, the future of Venus Freight Line and of Lane Shannon, crashing in the clouds of Venus.

Shannon shook his head to clear the dread vision.

A miracle came to pass. The G-3 lay in her cradle, fueled and ready, with cradle-crew tense at the controls to send her up to blast-off level. A miracle did it. A miracle named Mike Killmer.

"Up! Fast!" Shannon roared and plunged into the hold.

The port lock slammed and he dogged it shut, leaped for the empty bucket seat as the cradle tilted and rumbled underneath. Shannon's hands were shaking until they touched the controls, found the old steadiness he had lost with his license, three years ago.

They were snapping him up. The red light flashed and almost instantly cut to green. Good men on the Moon cradles. Fuel. Ignition. Kick the booster, shove the Bolton home. Ride the thunder to Venus.

It was a blast-off that would have killed a pilot on Earth. Here, under the Moon's lesser pull, it only blacked out Shannon's senses and beat his body with a thousand mighty hammers.

WHEN he came to, the beam carrier receiver was spluttering. He snapped it on.

"Shannon! Lane Shannon, come back here and submit to arrest. You're only making things tougher for yourself and your men by fleeing. You can't dodge the Space Patrol—"

The receiver continued to whine, warning Shannon of his peril. He snapped it off. Back toward the dark bubble of the Moon, streaks of thin crimson were darting upward—patrol ships, seeking him. Faster ships than the G-3, these patrol vessels, armed and equipped with detectors, authorized by law to blast him out of the sky if he failed to heed a stop order.

He had to shake off pursuit, keep out of detector range. Tubby Martin had done it, somehow. Shannon sent the G-3 hurtling off at an angle, away from the Earth-Moon routes, completely away from the Venus track. Then he began to throw it into a systematic, dizzy zigzag course that was the more bewildering because it took full advantage of three-dimensional space.

The detectors might catch him at times by accident, but they'd have to be good to hold him long enough for the Space Patrol to get a line.

Presently the receiver stopped whining and the crimson splinters were no longer visible from the ports. Shannon adjusted his controls for robot operation, set a course for Venus. Then he slumped back into the bucket seat, laid his head against the padded rest and slept for the first time in forty-eight hours.

He awoke with an aching body but a mind clearer and reasonably refreshed. It was a shock to realize that he had slept through nearly seven hours of unguarded flight. A dozen perils might have menaced him during the period, but apparently none had. Earth was just another planet in the blackness behind.

Shannon moved around to limber cramped muscles, snapped on the private televisor on the bare chance Al Spaine or Mike Killmer might get a chance to call on the Venus transmitter. Marquard would be down by this time and probably in custody, as surely would Ohrbeck back on Earth. The stark slenderness of his hope, the desperation of his mad gamble swept down on Shannon then with a strangling fear.

To fight off the grim doubts, he set about getting his location and speed. This necessitated digging clear back into his student-pilot days, dredging up rusty bits of astrogation he had all but forgot in the longer experience of flying under beam control. He shot fixed stars from the port windows and worked out his position. Then, to make sure, he shot again and reworked the figures.

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There was a hopeless divergence in his two results. Shannon groaned, gritted his teeth and went through the racking task once more. This time he got an agreement with the second figure, found the error that had thrown his first calculation off. With time and location and a knowledge of his speed under full blast, he could calculate a probable arrival at Venus in about eighteen hours.

Then came the calculation he dreaded to make—his established speed against Tubby Martin's possible time. Even with the two ships flashing along similar courses, pointing a narrowing trajectory at the same eventual focus, there was not one chance in millions of actually sighting the G-1 in space. His only hope of success lay in beating Martin to Morgreb Pass, somehow intercepting and stopping him there. A futile, well, nigh impossible hope.

SHANNON finished his calculations and sat gnawing at his fists. He should be able to beat the G-1 by a slender margin—if he had correctly guessed how much time Tubby Martin lost shaking off pursuit before he set his direct course. That was the blind factor, the unknown "X" in the formula. The slender margin between life and death.

When the televisor screen suddenly hummed and flickered with a clearing image, Shannon's heart nearly pounded itself out of his chest. The screen was set on Venus Freight Line's own private wave. A signal there meant either the I. B. I. was cutting in to deliver a threat—or one of the Venus men had been free and able to reach a transmitter.

The image flickered and cleared. Shannon's pulses raced, then slowed to icy calm. This is it, he thought. Success or failure.

Tubby Martin's face was on the screen, glassy eyes staring out at Lane Shannon, flicking away, returning to stare again. Sight of the puffy, mottled face, the mad eyes, the twitching lips with raw marks of worrying teeth, tore at Shannon's heart.

This is your handiwork, Shannon thought. Look at it. The bugs of madness might have been there before. But you set them crawling, nourished them on your own warped hatred.

"You," Tubby Martin said at last, hoarsely. "You're not at the office. Where are you?"

Careful, Shannon's mind shrieked at him. Everything depends on your answers now. Words are your only weapon. Words and the tone of your voice.

This was why he had dared punishment to fly again, in the face of his revoked license. This was why he had left Al Spaine and Mike Killmer and the I. B. I. man behind. Because the only hope of success lay with Shannon alone. Because no one but Lane Shannon could hope to make the madman believe the lie he had to tell. The lie that might save lives.

"Not at the office, Tubby," he said gently, carefully. "I'm out in space, flying again, close enough to you right now to reach out and touch you."

"You can't stop me! You can't stop me!" Martin's face screwed up craftily. "You know what I'm going to do?"

"Of course. It's the only thing to do, Tubby. Poetic justice. Take him up there where Mack Drummond is waiting and wipe the slate clean."

"You're not going to stop me, Lane. You can't stop me."

"Of course not, Tubby. I'm going along. Mack was my friend, too. Remember that morning I blasted off with the *Turtle?* How he risked his job to give me that drink that drove out the chills and fever? Mack's waiting for me too, Tubby."

Tears welled grotesquely out of the other's glazed eyes.

"But you said you weren't interested in squaring things for Mack any more. You said it was freight you were fighting for."

"You saw through that, didn't you?" Shannon asked. "They were trying to make me stop fighting altogether. I had to fool them so I could keep on, trick them into helping me."

He hesitated, watching the expressions swirl across Tubby Martin's face. At last he asked the question that had been beating at his brain.

"You haven't—haven't done any-

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thing to them yet, have you?"

"Oh, no. Only telling them about Mack and me and how we're going to meet him soon. Wait, I'll show you."

Martin's hands came toward the screen, blurred out of focus as he fumbled with the scanner setting. The scene began to slide across the receiver plate, to reveal a corner of the ancient, rusty cabin. The image paused, tilted, focused at last on the two bound figures lying on the floor plates.

LANE SHANNON could see old Titus Conway's face, still cold and hard. Only his eyes showed the fear that must be a living agony inside him. He looked up at Shannon on the screen and hope came into his face.

Shannon knew Tubby Martin was watching him, probing his every facial expression. He dared not give any sign of assurance.

He looked beyond Conway at the girl, his daughter. Suddenly the cabin, the screen, the flickering image, all were reeling and blurring before his eyes. He blinked desperately, looked again. It was mad, impossible, but—

Dear heaven, the girl was Marla Wylie!

"Tubby! Listen to me. You've made a ghastly mistake. That—that's Marla, Tubby. Marla Wylie!"

Tubby Martin laughed and the grating cacophony clawed at Shannon's nerves.

"Sure it is, Lane. Didn't you know? Marla Wylie is Titus Conway's daughter. You didn't know that, eh? Al Spaine and Mike Killmer didn't know it, either. But I knew it, Lane. I followed her to his office and heard the whole thing. That's why she's going with us—going to join Mack up there on Nason Peak."

CHAPTER X

The Crucial Hour

SHANNON fought to control his nerves, fought until he felt empty and sick, until cold perspiration soaked his clothing and ran into his eyes. He fought, and somewhere found the strength to keep his face blank and his voice level.

"I didn't know that, Tubby. You're certain?"

"Dead certain. She admits it, in fact. They both admit it. You liked her a lot, didn't you, Lane? I could see it in your eyes. She'd have made you stop fighting after a while. . . ."

"Shannon, listen to me!" Titus Conway was straining against his bonds, hurling his parched voice at the screen pickup. "I've never crawled to any man before in my life, but I'll crawl now if crawling will save my girl. Not for myself, but for her. She ran away from me, changed her name, went to work for one of my competitors because she couldn't see my way of fighting for what I wanted. She hates my insides, but—"

"Dad, I don't!" Marla's choked cry of protest clawed at Shannon's heart. "I simply couldn't stay and watch you trample on other men's lives and dreams to fatten your purse. I told you that. But even when you almost had Billy Anderson murdered, I couldn't hate—"

"What?" Titus Conway bawled. "I didn't order his tubes smashed. Don't you read the newstapes? I ordered his ignition fixed so it would cut out and leave him drifting a few days, time enough for me to snap up all the available payloads.

"But I didn't order *that*. If I had any killing to do, I'd do it myself. The man who took it on himself to smash those steering and brake tubes is in jail right now—where *I* put him and where *I'll* keep him!"

"I—I'm glad," Marla breathed softly. "I should have known, Dad."

Shannon barely heard the words. He was fighting to control his facial expressions, to keep them cold and unrelenting. If he let any warmth creep into his eyes, let Tubby Martin guess how he really felt, the madman would guess the trap that was being laid. Shannon deliberately looked away from both Conway and Marla.

Out of sight of the scanner he fumbled at the controls, easing in the steering throttles, keeping their rumble below the thunder of the stern

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tubes.

They were light blasts, but under their drive the G-3 was veering, turning, swinging slowly in a great spiral. Shannon's eyes were glued to the image on the screen, his ears strained for every variation in the pitch and volume of Tubby Martin's voice.

Unknown to the madman, Shannon was making the G-3 a directional antenna, swinging it until variations in sound and image gave him a point on the other ship. It took an unbearably long time but eventually he got it. There was a minute but unmistakable maximum, that told him the G-3 was pointing its nose straight at the G-1.

Shannon's breath hissed out and some of the knots went out of his nerves. As near as he could estimate without an accurate bearing, Tubby Martin's ship was behind the G-3 by a slight margin. He swung off, back to a Venus course, to conserve that slender lead and prevent possible collision.

"We're getting close to Venus, Tubby," Shannon said then. "Let's stop talking for awhile and concentrate on the controls. I'll meet you at the north edge of Morgreb Gap on the old Trans-Venus beam route."

"You're going to crash with us, Lane?"

Shannon chewed at the inside of his cheek.

"Of course I am, Tubby."

THE rolling clouds were reaching up hungrily now. Shannon was decelerating dangerously, rocking the ship with terrible, shuddering brake blasts that strained the plates and pounded him with the furies of all agony. He drove down, biting his lips, praying that Martin's old G-1 would take the brake blasts without falling apart, praying that the madness had not robbed Martin's hands of their skill at the controls.

They were flying close together now, on parallel paths, with the G-3 still leading. Shortly they thundered over Venus City, buried in the fog blanket two miles below. Shannon could tell by the zone of quiet, then resumption of the guide-beam signals on a different note.

"Follow the beam, Tubby."

"I'm following it, Lane."

Shannon began to sweat again. This was it. Whatever was going to happen would happen within the next twenty minutes at the most.

He knew what he had to do. *Had* to do. Steady your nerves, calm your voice, Shannon. Marla and those other two will live or die by what you say now and how you say it.

"Tubby!"

"Yes, Lane."

"Allen Spaine and Mike Killmer and the rest—they're our friends, yours and mine."

"I know."

"Tubby, that old G-One you're flying—it doesn't mean anything to them. It's an old discarded crate. They'll never miss it. I'd ordered it sold for junk, anyhow."

Tubby Martin laughed hoarsely.

"It'll be junk, Lane!"

"But Tubby, this G-Three I'm flying is a good ship. They need it to carry on. Without it, those boys will be hurt. Maybe lose the company, find themselves ruined. That would be selfish of me."

"You can't turn back now. You'd hurt Mack's feelings."

"I don't want to turn back," Shannon said soothingly. "I want to go with you—to Nason Peak to meet Mack, Tubby. But I don't want to smash up the G-Three and hurt our friends. I want to come over and join you. We'll all meet Mack together, wipe the slate clean all at once."

Martin's face twitched.

"But you can't, Lane. You're out there and we're here—"

"I can, Tubby. I've figured out how. You remember when I crashed the *Turtle?*"

"I remember. That was Titus Conway's fault, too."

"I know. Listen, Tubby. Out there in Morgreb Gap, where I crashed, there's a nice island in the swamp. An easy spot to land on. Let's land there, you and I. I'll show you the way. It's easy to find by that patch of green fog. We'll land there and I'll beam Venus Spaceport where we are and tell them to come and pick up the G-Three.

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"But meantime, I'll rush over and get into your ship and we'll blast off again—off for Nason Peak and Mack."

Shannon held his breath until his lungs ached. The G-3 quivered to the tension of his hands on the manual controls. He could see Tubby Martin's face twisting, working, trying to figure it out.

"You can't find it, Lane. And Mack doesn't want me to delay. He's telling me to hurry. I'll go on alone—"

"No, wait! How about those fifty-eight passengers Titus Conway murdered when his rotten mush crashed the *Turtle?* Are you going to let him forget them? We'll land on my island, show him how fifty-eight people look who died hating him, cursing him. *He* won't want you to land there, Tubby, because he'll be afraid!"

"That's right, Lane. Fifty-eight ghosts ought to have a chance to see him tremble and hear him scream for mercy. You show me where, Lane. I'll come down."

Shannon was trembling, shaking so that he could hardly control himself. He'd done it. Tubby Martin was going to land. Please heaven, there *is* an island there to land on and Tubby can hit it, Shannon prayed.

"Down, Tubby," he said, as though to a child. "Down under five hundred and fight the wind. It's awful in Morgreb Gap. Remember? Pump out your air vanes and ride them downwind. I'm going down now. You follow."

"I'm following, Lane."

DOWN! Down! Thundering jets and suddenly the big ship heeling over, twisting to the tug of the screaming wind. Fog shredding away, making crazy, demoniac figures in the gray light, dancing and posturing, beckoning Shannon down the chasm of the Gap.

He held a cross-wind course, fighting drift and lashing wind, to reach the calmer area at the south rim. Guiding Tubby Martin with low-voiced encouragement and advice.

Everything was memory, now. Shannon had to remember just where he was, just how hard the wind blasted at him when he had at last turned east before it. The green fog might not be there any more. It might be such a narrow patch that they could thunder past only a few yards from its edge and never see it.

"Downwind now, Tubby. Ride the wind and decelerate to a bare lift-velocity. Watch for the green fog."

It was there before Shannon realized it—that seething wall of ugly, poisonous green. He barely had time to do the thing he was doing at the moment. Then he was wriggling hurriedly into his bulging space-suit, clamping down the helmet, opening air valves.

Shannon got the face-plate shut and sealed a moment before the G-3 plowed into the blinding fog. He had already cut off his own screen, maintaining contact with Tubby Martin through the audio unit.

"I'm in the fog, Tubby. In the green fog. Going down for a landing. The moment you hit the fog, nose down and brake. Come in as gently as you can. I'll be waiting for you—in the fog."

Heaven, put some solid ground under my keel, Shannon prayed. Then—

"I see the fog, Lane. I'm diving into it now."

Shannon jumped. He hadn't realized Tubby Martin was as close to his tail. If he had guessed wrong now, it was the end of everything.

Shannon brake-blasted once more, felt the big ship ride almost motionless and then drop. There was a grinding thud, an impact that jarred his teeth.

He was down, safe, resting on level ground.

"I'm coming down, Lane."

Flame and fury burst out of the green wall above and behind Shannon. The blunt, scarred nose of the G-1 poised, then dropped. The transmitter cut out. Shannon could hear nothing, but through the port he could see the shadowy space-craft plowing along the ground, spurting green-tinged flame. It stopped at last no more than a hundred feet away.

The fog down here was not as thick as Shannon had first believed. But suppose the green fog was a deadly poison. Suppose they were all dead

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or dying in the G-1 from its effects. But that could hardly be, for Shannon himself had lived through it—somehow.

He tumbled out of his ship, encumbered by the bulky suit, and went staggering across broken, rocky ground. Fingers of the green fog danced and writhed from tiny cracks and fissures around him. He thought he saw forms, human forms, darting through the green fog close by.

Then the G-1's port was opening, the blank face of Tubby Martin appearing. He stood in the port, clutching at the lock seals, swaying a little. Shannon gathered all his muscles, ran a dozen shambling steps and launched himself at the reeling figure.

He crashed into Tubby Martin, fumbling with gauntleted, steel-shod hands to pinion the madman's flailing arms. He could see Martin's mouth open around screams he could not hear. They went backward, crashing to the G-1's floor with Shannon on top.

The madness lent Tubby Martin a terrific strength. Shannon was hampered by his bulging space-suit. They rolled and fought. Martin lashed out with kicks and blows, his mouth shaping ghastly, silent shrieks, his eyes wide and flame-filled.

SOMEHOW, a lucky kick rolled Shannon aside. Tubby Martin tore loose, got to his feet and raced out the port. Shannon scrambled upright, staggered after him. He could see the chunky figure vanishing into the wall of green fog. Saw it waver, fling up its arms and then vanish—straight down.

Shannon got there moments later. It made him a little sick to see where Tubby Martin had disappeared in the bubbling, seething quicksand that rolled endlessly against the lip of the rocky island. In a moment, the bubbles stopped coming up to the surface of the mud.

Shannon turned and stumbled back to the G-1. Tears were streaming down his face, burning his cheeks inside the helmet. But it was better this way. Back on Earth, there would always be the shadow of those two guards shot down in the kidnaping. Nothing could have wiped that deed away. Maybe Mack Drummond wasn't up on Nason Peak, after all. Maybe he'd come down to meet his friend halfway.

CHAPTER XI

Journey's End

MARLA and Titus Conway lay on the cabin floor, staring up at Lane Shannon, shaping soundless words with their lips. Shannon shook his head, closed the G-1's locks and began to exhaust the air inside.

When the air had been completely changed and every filament of green gas sucked out, he opened his face-plate.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, oh yes! Lane! Lane! You saved our lives!"

"Uh-huh." Shannon's face was suddenly cold, his bearing noncommittal. He found a knife and cut away the ropes from their wrists and ankles.

Titus Conway was trying to speak, getting only incoherent croaks through his emotion-dried throat. Shannon ignored him, beyond helping them both stand up.

"You don't feel any ill effects from the gas?"

"The green fog, you mean?" Marla asked, wincing at the pain of returning circulation. "No. Except that the sweetish smell is a little sickening. What is it?"

Shannon shook his head.

"I don't know. Someone who knows chemistry will have to answer that one. But it seems to act the way some of those old-time barbiturate drugs used to, not dulling consciousness while you're in it but wiping out all memories of that period afterward.

"I figured it had to be something like that, because I must have spent nearly five weeks in it and couldn't remember a thing. Still, I couldn't take chances, so I wore my suit and breathed canned oxygen until I was sure."

"This—" Titus Conway found fragments of his voice. "This is where

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the CC-Four crashed? You actually *couldn't* remember?"

Shannon ignored the question.

"If you two are all right," he said coldly, "I'm opening the lock again. We're going for a little walk outside."

He led them out into the green fog again, stumbling across the smoking plain, leading them toward something he had glimpsed only vaguely while chasing Tubby Martin. They came to it presently.

It was the *Turtle,* the old CC-4. Not smashed into twisted girders and buckled plates but resting quietly, whole and undamaged, except for the blast-torn stern assembly of its gigantic body.

Titus Conway made strangled noises in his throat, gaping at the apparition. Marla gasped sharply, then moved toward the big space ferry, watching Lane Shannon from the corner of her eye.

A side port of the ferry was open, leading into the keel space, where hooded tractors stood nose-to-tail in the gloom. Up a steel ladder, a hatch was open into the passenger deck. Shannon began to climb this ladder and the others followed.

They reached the passenger deck and stepped out onto the rusty floor plates. A tattered, bearded scarecrow popped up from one of the seats, stared and began to shriek.

"Saved! Saved! They found us! We're saved at last!"

More scarecrows appeared, stumbling out of the darkness to swirl around Shannon and his companions, pumping his hand, beating him feebly on the back.

"We thought you'd crashed, man," one of the figures croaked. "We waited and waited for the help you were going to bring."

"What?" Shannon's legs were suddenly shaking under him. He leaned against a broken seat, feverishly counting the figures. Forty-three men and women—forty-three of the fifty-eight passengers who had trusted him on his maiden flight.

"What?" he gasped again. "You mean I went for help? In the lifeboat? You'd better tell me about it. This fog—it blanks out memories. I couldn't remember where I'd been or how I got back."

A GAUNT giant whistled.

"No wonder!" he exclaimed. "We landed here safely but hard enough to wreck the communibeam transmitter. Exploring, we found this was a little patch of solid ground, an island in the midst of quicksand with no way to get off.

"You were the only one who could fly, so you went for help. Nobody went with you, because we couldn't be sure you'd make it against the wind. We've been waiting ever since, penned here by this devilish mud."

"But food!" Marla gasped. "How did you—"

The scarecrow nodded toward Shannon.

"He did it. Rigged a condenser to get water from the fog out beyond this green stuff. For food, he showed us a whole cargo of canned edibles meant for the plantations. We cut it thin and made it last."

Conway was clutching at Shannon's arm.

"Shannon, listen to me! You'll get your flying license back and there won't be any prosecution over piloting illegally. I'll give you a job in my organization—"

"The evidence of this ship and these people," Shannon cut in coldly, "will get my license back. And I don't want a job. I already have one—beating you to a standstill on Venus freight. We're at war. Remember?

"This interlude is an armistice, maybe—but not a treaty of peace! I've come to know you too well, Conway. But there's something you can do, if you want to save yourself a lot of trouble about all this."

"Wh-what is it?"

"I'm getting a list of men you kicked out, blacklisted the way you did me, and for no more reason. They're bitter, but most of them are good men. I'm hiring all I can. I'll send the rest over to you to get their jobs back."

Purple began to wash up over Conway's jowls and his neck corded. Then the anger subsided and a crafty look slid into his eyes.

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"All right," he said agreeably. "I'll hire them back—and compensate them for the time they were off."

Shannon ignored the sly look. He turned away, herded the shabby castaways back out of earshot. For a long time he talked earnestly, while Marla stared and her father fidgeted. Finally he came back, still wooden-faced. Marla stepped in front of him and put the palms of her hands against his jacket, looking up at him.

"Lane, you know now I wasn't at Venus Freight Line as a spy. Do you think I'm quitting now, switching my allegiance to the other side, just because I still love my father?"

An incredulous light was growing in Shannon's eyes.

"You're not quitting? There's a fight ahead, tougher than any we've yet faced. I'm going to make Venus the strongest freight line in interplanetary commerce, but it'll mean war every step of the way. Your father is ready to promise anything now, but wolves don't turn into lambs. Once back on solid ground and we'll be right where we started."

"I don't care," Marla told him. "As long as it's a clean fight, a fight for the right dream, I want to be a part of it—on your side, Lane."

Shannon suddenly laughed exultantly. He turned, put a gauntleted hand against Titus Conway's furious face—and pushed.

"Beat it! Marla and I are taking the weaker folks back to Venus City. We'll bring help for the rest. Meanwhile, you stay here and write out the fancy promises you've been making. I know what you figured, Conway. Once outside this fog, none of us would remember what was said here. We won't—but we'll still be able to read!"

"I'll smash you!" Conway snarled, shaking with anger. "The fight you got before will be nothing to what you'll get now! You didn't know it, but I've already set the wheels in motion to grab every piece of Venus freighting. I'll run at a dead loss for six months, if necessary. Let's see you hang on that long without a penny's worth of business! I've got the money to beat you."

SHANNON chuckled pleasantly.

"You'll have quite a bit less when you pay these people for Morgreb Gap."

"What?" Conway roared. "You imbecile! I own Morgreb Gap! I *own* it! Bought it from the government for a song and—"

"The government," Shannon said placidly, "sold it illegally. They didn't own it. Morgreb Gap belongs to these passengers. To get ownership you'll have to buy it again, from them—at their price. Maybe you aren't familiar with Venus land claim laws, Conway. Anyone who spends one year on a piece of property becomes the legal owner.

"These people spent three years here—the first to ever set foot in the Gap. They'd already earned title before you got the bright idea of buying it."

"It's a trick!" Conway howled furiously. "I won't buy it. I won't pay them a nickel. Let 'em keep their fool property!"

"Good!" Shannon whirled briskly on the grinning scarecrows. "You heard that. He rejects your offer to sell. That leaves you people in full possession and ownership of the Gap. You can either accept my cash offer or hold it for exploitation. My advice is to hang on.

"There's a fortune for everyone in this green gas. Back on Earth, it will revolutionize medicine and surgery. Our best science hasn't produced an anesthetic to equal it. You exploit it and Venus Freight Line will carry it. There's enough business in transporting it alone to outfit Venus with the latest ships and show a profit, whether we get any other business or not.

"Come over to the ship and we'll draw up contracts— No, wait a minute! There's something more important that comes first."

Shannon whirled, tipping back his helmet, and took Marla's arm.

"I had three years to figure out what happened here and how the green fog must act. I was sure I hadn't crashed, because your Dad's own doctors couldn't find a bump or bruise on me.

"That was why I led Tubby Martin here. It was the only place I knew

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where there might be safe landing, yet wouldn't make him suspicious of a trick. Finding the passengers like this was more than I dared hope for. But I was right about how the green fog acts!"

And then for the first time Lane Shannon grinned, almost shyly.

"I'm going to kiss you now, Marla. You won't remember it afterward, so you can't hold it against me. Maybe you'll never give me another chance, but—"

Marla's eyes were glowing. She blushed furiously, disengaged her arm and then gave Shannon a gentle shove.

"Let's go back to the ship. And for fear you won't remember this afterward, I want everything you're going to say to me put down in writing!"

Titus Conway watched them disappear into the fog. There was a frustrated scowl on his face, but a light of grudging admiration shone in his eyes.

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in

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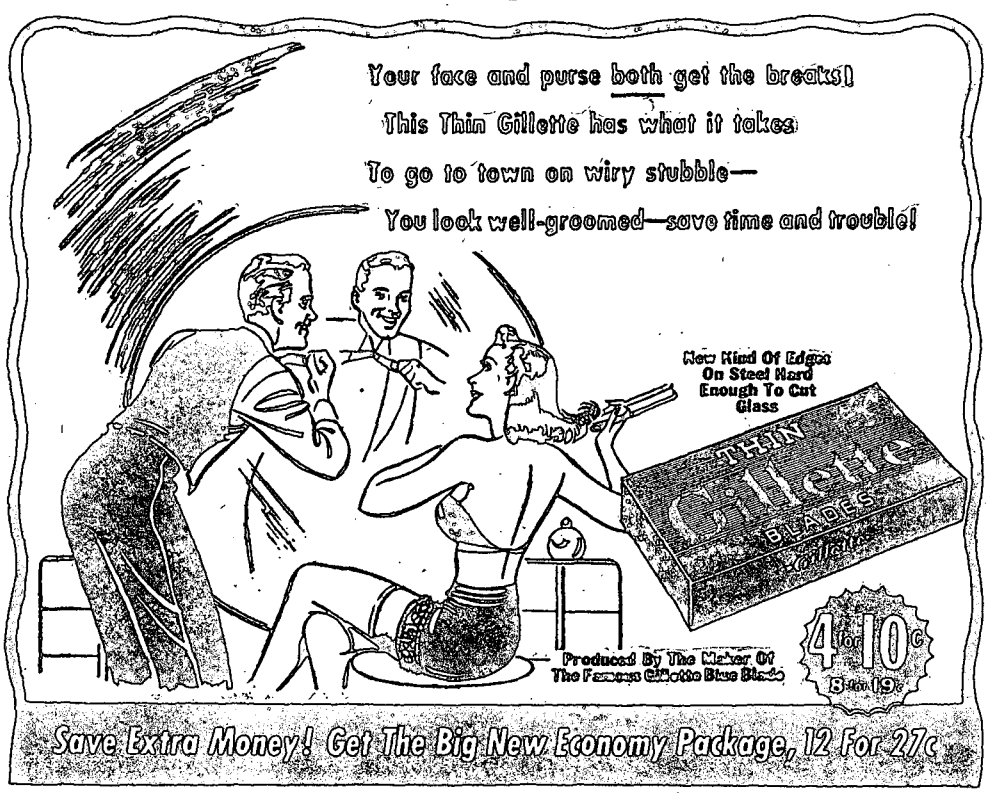
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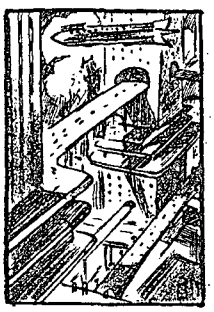
LAST DISAPPEARANCE

By SAMUEL HOFFMAN

Elmer Blurt Was a Grievously Henpecked Man—Until, to His Amazement, Things Began to Vanish Inexplicably!



THE first time it happened Elmer Blurt cast frantically about for an explanation, and found none. It was a small camera, just an ordinary candid camera, small enough to fit into a large man's pocket, and it had disappeared from under his nose, or rather from out of the show case under his nose. It had simply vanished like smoke in a fog coincident with his thought that it might as well not be there because he couldn't buy it.

The resulting shock sent a shiver through his thin, spare frame and served to aggravate the mental anxiety resulting from his usual morning set-to with Katie. Elmer was not a little man, but his rounded shoulders and the perpetual nagged-out look on his face gave him the air of a hound dog that had forgotten where he had hidden his last bone. And now he looked as though he'd forgotten he ever had a bone.

They could have taken the camera out of the window last night, he thought, and he, with Katie's voice still rattling his brains, had not noticed that fact until this instant. But how could that be when he'd been examining its fine points for the last five minutes? Speeds up to one five-hundredth of a second, 3.5 lens, coupled range finder—the whole works, and all for only twenty-five dollars.

Now it was gone, vanished, seeming to confirm his resigned thought that he could never have that gem of a camera, anyway, not without Katie's consent, and getting that would be like pulling the tooth of a bucking bronco while riding him bareback. As far as Elmer was concerned, that camera might just as well have been nonexistent. A tremor ran through him and the air whistled inward through his teeth. Could it be that the camera's disappearance was in answer to the very thought that he could never have it? That's what he was thinking when it took a powder.

The idea was colossal, stupendous, much too big for his ordinary brain. It brought a whistling to his ears as well as his lips. The whistle changed to a ringing and seemed to pass from his ears to the inside of his head where it drowned out the last feeble vibration of Katie's rasping voice. When he turned away from the window, he looked like a man with a glass eye in both sockets.

As he walked down the street he told himself that it was silly to think that *he* could have caused the camera to pull a disappearing act. Yet it was positively weird the way it vanished at the precise moment the words "It might just as well not be there," came to his mind. No, he had not really said that; he had merely thought it. But such things don't happen; they can't!

The whole idea sounded wackier by

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Instantly the bag was gone—just like that!

the minute, Elmer told himself as he stopped at the corner for a red light. Standing there, his eyes lighted on a tall, fat man a few feet away, obviously waiting for a bus. Beside him on the ground was a large black bag which he was too tired or too lazy to carry. Elmer looked at the bag.

"Aw, it's silly even to think of it," he mumbled half to himself. But he couldn't tear his eyes away from the bag, and suddenly his round shoulders squared a little, his jaw jutted forward a fraction of an inch, and he began repeating with as much determination as he could muster, "It's going to disappear. It's going to disap—"

Instantly the bag was gone—just like that! His jaw dropped open and his eyes bulged out. The fat man missed it, too, and whirled swiftly around with a comical half-twist to see if it weren't behind him. Then he sprang backward two steps; perchance his stomach was blocking the view, for he was too fat to see his own shoes.

He pushed his hat to the back of his head and looked queerly at Elmer while he mopped his brow with a handkerchief. Elmer stared back at the man and felt an almost uncontrollable desire to laugh. A half-hysterical, "Heh, heh, heh," even passed his lips, and then he huddled deep into his coat, turned on his heel, and stumbled dazedly down the street.

But where had the black bag and the camera vanished to? That was the puzzling question. If he could only figure that out—explain it—understand it—he would feel better.

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Where?

By the time Elmer was himself again, a rapid inventory showed him that it was half an hour later and that he was directly responsible for the disappearance of the following items: a policeman's nightstick, a pawn broker's brass balls, a manhole cover, and six one-way street signs.

It was true. By some uncanny quirk, or what have you, he was able to make things vanish. Too bad he didn't have the reverse power of bringing things into existence, he mused, thinking of the camera. For a moment he pawed about in the recesses of his mind for the bit of sterilized scientific news that sometimes seeps down to the public via the back pages of newspapers. Something about matter equals energy equals thought. But prolonged mental exertion was beyond Elmer at this particular moment and he gave it up.

He was aware of only one thing, that this new-found power must not interfere with his daily routine, at least, not until he had worked out some practical uses for it. He must continue in his daily life undisturbed. He must give out with at least a dozen "Yes-my-dears," to his wife's never-ending harangues. He must restrain himself mightily from beating the living daylights out of his spoiled brat of a son, Bernard. And he must hold up, but stoutly, his end of the more violent arguments with Katie by quietly reading his newspaper.

GAZING morosely down the street, it was a full minute before Elmer realized that he was only a block away from his bank, his secret bank, as he liked to term it, for he wasn't supposed to have an account since Katie allowed him only spending money. He had twenty-six bucks in that bank, saved dollar by dollar from his allowance over a period of three years.

At once he decided to act on his half-formed wishes. He would buy one of those cameras. Katie would raise the roof, there'd be a big fuss, and Bernard would undoubtedly take the camera apart the first time Elmer left it unguarded at home. But at least the excitement would take his mind off this perplexing disappearance business.

Hurriedly he entered the bank while enthusiasm yet fired his veins. With a trembling hand he made out the withdrawal slip and presented it to the teller.

"Twenty-five dollars, please," he said confirming the evidence of the slip.

"Twenty-five dollars," the teller repeated, looking at the piece of paper, "for Elmer Blurt."

He fished out the proper account card, made the necessary notations and shoved five crisp fives at Elmer from under the bars of his cage. He turned back to the huge pile of bills he was counting when Elmer interrupted him.

Elmer looked at that sheaf of currency, not longingly, but with curiosity, as he would at a museum relic. He wondered what would happen if— An uncontrollable giggle suddenly rushed to his lips. He had almost thought the fateful thought. But the hesitation was itself an acknowledgment, and the money vanished.

The teller did not realize this until he put the following bill down and found it resting on the bare counter instead of on a two-inch stack of good American currency. His bewilderment was indescribable. He looked at the counter, he looked at the floor, and he looked at Elmer. Elmer felt like laughing, and he would have, had not his throat been constricted by fear. So, clutching his twenty-five dollars, he did the next best thing and fled.

He did not even realize that the bank alarm was blazing away when he hopped into a bus on the corner, and made his way back to the camera shop.

AN hour later he was entering his home with the new camera nestling securely in its shiny leather case which he had slung proudly over his shoulder. He thought at first to hide it under his coat, but he knew he couldn't keep it indefinitely from Katie, so he decided to be open about it.

"E-l-m-e-r!" Katie's harsh voice

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scraped across his eardrums like sandpaper as she greeted him from the kitchen doorway, a wooden ladle in her hand. "Have you brought the lima beans from the green grocer's? You haven't!" This last was followed by a shriek which ordinary mortals reserve for such occasions as the murder of a dearly beloved mother.

"Oh, what kind of a man are you?" she cried. "Where is your brain that you can't remember such a simple thing as a few lima beans. Now I'll have to send Bernard. Poor boy, he's working himself into an early grave over his school books. You know he's much too frail for such work, and you have to forget the lima beans. I've half a mind to send you right back for them."

Elmer meekly hung his hat and coat in the hall closet. He knew from long experience that you can't fight a storm, you must ride it out like a good sailor. But an audible silence settled over the household, and Elmer looked up, startled. He found Katie's wooden ladle pointed at his midsection.

"And what is that?" she demanded suspiciously.

Without knowing the contents of the leather case, she immediately disproved it merely on the grounds that it was not authorized by her.

"A—a camera," mumbled Elmer, whose attempts to say anything but yes in his own home always cost him an effort.

"A camera!" The ladle trembled with Katie's indignation. "And where did you get the money to buy it with?"

"I - bought - it - on - the - installment - plan - a - dollar - down - and - a - dollar - a - week." Elmer rattled out in a single breath, hoping to forestall the coming deluge.

"I knew I married a fool," groaned Katie, raising her arms ceilingward, a typical gesture which Elmer always imagined was a supplication to Heaven for strength to chastize him, "but I didn't think you were fool enough to spend your hard-earned money for a piece of junk like that. The least you could have done was to take me along to bargain for you. As it is, you probably paid twice what it was worth—as usual when you buy anything for yourself. And of all things to buy, a camera! What earthly use can you have for it beyond something to squander more money on for films?"

Meet the Author of This Story

WRITING about oneself for publication turns out to be something of a problem, especially for those who haven't learned to be modest boastfully. To the layman, a request to "say a few words about yourself" is merely a problem in individual psychology, but to the psychiatrist it is almost standard technique in the treatment of obsessions, phobias, and even manias. How many psychologists, amateur and otherwise, will use the following paragraphs to probe into my subconscious?

The most obvious and indisputable fact about me is that I was born 29 years ago in Brooklyn (please reserve judgment) and still live there. Since that time a great many things have happened to me. Among them: I fell on my head and became a scientifiction fan. I assure you, these two occurrences have nothing whatsoever in common. I am married, have a one-year-old son, and work in a clothing factory. Previous to that, I was a shipping clerk, messenger boy, movie usher, soda jerker, and pants presser. I smoke a pipe—between cigars, play a little chess (very bad), snap a few pictures, eat apples and drink beer, last two separately.

Among all these activities, I had time to go to N. Y. U. where I studied Journalism, English, and Psychology. I hoped to make my place in the publishing world, but when I graduated I found myself confronted with a neat little cycle of no-experience-no-job-no-job-no-experience which I have yet to crack. So after knocking at dozens of editorial doors unsuccessfully, I decided to get a substitute. Now the mailman knocks at the same dozens of doors, carrying dozens of my stories.

"Last Disappearance" is my own first appearance, and TWS is responsible for what I hope to be the beginning of a new career. I hope you like this story.

—Samuel Hoffman.

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And so it began, Katie's own version of a nightly jam session that was to continue to bedtime. It always depressed Elmer considerably, and he fervently hoped that some day he would have the courage to do something drastic about it, like getting a divorce, or at the very least telling her to shut her big mouth.

He shuffled morosely into the dining-room and sat down opposite Bernard who had already slopped halfway through his fruit cup.

"Hello, shutterbug!" greeted Bernard through a mouthful of canned fruit.

ELMER almost retched at the thought of what he felt like doing to his own son. But, as usual, he merely glowered at Bernard and began his dinner, trying by intensive concentration on his plate to blot out Katie's eternal chattering.

Everything went smoothly enough until dessert when Bernard asked for a third helping of pie. Elmer wondered how he did it. What with all the hot dogs, soda pop, ice cream and cake that the kid packed away during the day, he marvelled that he had any appetite left for his regular meals. Somehow Elmer felt that it was his duty to do something about it, but one glance at the look of sweet indulgence in Katie's face paralyzed his unborn protest.

Anyway, if Katie saw fit to give him his third piece of pie that didn't mean Bernard was going to get it. Elmer hesitated for a moment, trying to keep out the strong feeling of doubt that was seeping into his mind, for this was the first time he was going to use his unearthly power deliberately.

Nevertheless, he took a tight grip on himself, looked intently on that brown triangle of crust and apples, and began vigorously imagining an empty plate. Instantly it was empty. The look of amazement on his son's face was worth it. This time Elmer almost enjoyed the half-hysterical laugh that rushed to his lips on these occasions.

"Hey, Maw, you didn't put any pie on this plate," Bernard cried petulantly, for he could not believe that it had actually disappeared.

"Oh, but I did, darling," cooed Katie, "sure you didn't drop it?"

"Of course not. You just didn't give me any."

"I certainly did. I distinctly remember putting it on your plate," responded his mother. Then the proper explanation seemed to dawn on her. "Elmer, did you take that piece of pie? You know you're not allowed to have more than one slice on account of your high blood pressure. Come now, what did you do with it? Give it back to Bernard immediately!"

Elmer felt sick at this unforeseen development, and would have given his brand new camera for a piece of apple pie at that moment. Fortunately the doorbell rang, putting a damper on Katie's forthcoming explosion.

"Go, Bernard, and see who it is," said Katie, keeping her icy stare fixed on Elmer as though to let him know that the piece of pie was yet to be accounted for.

Had Elmer not been a law-abiding citizen, he would immediately have recognized his two visitors as members of the police department.

"You Elmer Blurt?" one of them asked dourly, giving him a fast look at a piece of shiny metal in the palm of his hand. "The D.A. wants to see you."

"What? Why? But—but—" stuttered Elmer, a picture of the scene at the bank flashing through his mind. The teller must have traced him through his account.

KATIE, however, found this as good a substitute for the missing piece of pie as any.

"Now don't say a word, or you'll put your foot in it. Let me do all the talking," she admonished and, turning to the two strangers, she began officiously, "Now what do you want with my dolt of a husband? Have you a warrant to enter this house? If not, you can turn right around and get one.

"The idea of breaking in here like this, disturbing a peaceful family without so much as a may I. Besides, you can come back in the morning.

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I'm sure your business can wait that long, whatever it is."

The first plainclothes man replied as sourly as before. "Elmer Blurt is wanted on suspicion of robbing the First National Bank."

"O-o-h!" For once Katie was actually flabbergasted.

"Gee, Paw, yuh robbed a bank?" Bernard's eyes were each as large as his wide-open mouth. "Did yuh crack the safe, did yuh, huh?" For the first time a note of admiration had crept into Bernard's voice.

Elmer gulped once, twice, and managed to come up with a coherent sentence, "Let me get my hat and coat."

He shuffled down the hall to the closet and opened the door. He looked inside at his shabby clothes. He looked at the two detectives who had come to arrest him. He looked at Katie, silent for the first time since their wedding ceremony. He looked at Bernard, goggling a bank-robbing father. And suddenly his head began to whirl about like a pinwheel. Then he sprang into the closet, slamming and locking the door from within.

The detectives came to life at once. They jumped at the door and began pounding it with their burly fists.

"Open up, you fool! We'll get you anyway," they cried.

A low, uncontrollable gurgle of laughter came from behind the door.

"Come and get me," invited Elmer.

"If you don't come out, we'll break the door down!"

"Heh, heh. Heh, heh, heh!" was the only reply. A sound that faded indescribably.

The two policemen stepped backward and with a rush splintered the door beneath their combined weight. Hastily, they threw the broken boards aside, then stopped in open-mouthed wonder.

The closet was empty.

See LOOKING FORWARD *on Page 8 of this issue for Full Details of Our* AMATEUR STORY CONTEST

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ASTEROID CASTAWAYS

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

Patch Hated the Super-Civilization of the Thirtieth Century, but It Insisted on Keeping Him Meshed in Its Slimy Toils!

CHAPTER I

Stowaway

THE space-freighter *Drexel*, from St.Louis on Earth to Ekadome on Mars—via far-lying points on Venus and Ganymede—landed with lazy perfection on the topmost rocket-level of the Martian capital. Even as it levelled off and subsided, the hands lined up for their leave-tickets and pay. All fought for first place with the money-dealing skipper—all save Patch Merrick, big and broad and crowned with black curly hair. His swarthy face, that would have reminded more ancient observers of gypsy vagabond-chiefs, was absolutely blank. He kept purposefully at the end of the line, and remained with his commander after the others were paid and dismissed.

"Hmmm, Merrick," the skipper greeted ponderously, counting voucher notes. "Look fit. Hahmmm! Respectable. Useful member of society. Can thank the judge who sentenced you for vagrancy—thank me for asking to have you assigned to my ship. When we take off, next Wednesday, come back. Get first-class rating and pay. Now, here's what we owe you."

"Here, catch!" Merrick called, and tossed the improvised line toward Morgana

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Merrick smiled and received the sheaf of bills on his left palm. "Thanks. And here's what I owe *you*."

The left hand closed on the money, making a fist that leaped suddenly upward to the skipper's chin. Staggered, the officer was wide open for the right that clouted him under the ear and sent him sprawling under the control desk. Merrick tramped quickly out.

At the outer hatchway stood the *Drexel's* first mate, less pompous than the skipper but more practical. "Waitin' for you," he hailed Merrick sourly. "When you signed on, I issued you clothes and supplies. Counting interest at twelve per—"

Merrick's smile grew broader, and he belted the mate between his close-set eyes, pegged him in the solar plexus and chopped him on the angle of the jaw as he commenced to crumble. Down went the mate, and Merrick left the ship happily. Before him and around him stretched the acres of metal plating that overlay Ekadome's towers like a shingle atop many bottles.

"Fun," Merrick told himself. "My knuckles were itching for that! If the judge would only show up now—"

Vagrant. Merrick hadn't denied the title. If it meant someone who disliked dull work and supervision and limitation and routine—someone who since boyhood had dodged and avoided and fought the complex employment authorities of the Thirtieth Century, then Patch Merrick was a vagrant. But if it meant a drain and

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a danger to society, a thief, a living mote of friction on the conveyor-belt of progress, Patch Merrick pleaded not guilty. He didn't want civilization to bother him—he had tried not to bother civilization.

Living in a snug rough hut among the central thickets of the Ozark Forest Reserve, eating snared rabbits of which there were too many in any case—had that been sinful? Merrick loved nature and nature's ways, few though there were that survived the spread of cities and power. All he had wanted was to be let alone, with his hut and snares and little herb garden and a few ancient books.

But along had come a police patrol. After that, trial, sentence, and officious "rehabilitation," which meant forced labor aboard a metal-walled, oil-smelling space ship.

"Hey, you! Halt!" a voice shouted suddenly.

ONE backward look, then Merrick ran. The mate had staggered up and had somewhere mustered two spaceport guards. They were big and tough-looking with weapons and authority. If Merrick stopped to fight, more would come. His feet flashed to swifter speed, his eyes quartered the scene for sanctuary.

The big metal prairie had a score or more of kiosks with elevators to the lower town, but with the law after him, those avenues of escape would be given radio warning, would be guarded. The penthouses for signal apparatus, observation and administration were few and barred to casual visitors. But there were plenty of parked rockets. He dodged between two and sprinted for a big gathering of assorted craft.

The nearest was a neat luxury cruiser, the sort that Spaceways, Inc., provided for high-paying passengers. Merrick had a moment before his pursuers drew into sight, and he ran clear around this vessel, peering back from the far end. He saw the guards and the mate dash purposefully past, hunting for him among the maze of ships beyond.

"Rabbits teach you how to double back," he told himself. "Now where?"

He sauntered toward the open door of the cruiser. His eye saw the craft's blazoned name—*Omen*. Beneath it, a motto: *Astra castra—Omen nomen*.

Merrick knew the almost forgotten Latin language. "The stars my camp—Omen my name," he paraphrased.

Then a port official emerged from the door, speaking over his shoulder. "You may leave whenever you choose," he assured those in the craft. "Regulations are telescoped — clearance orders issued. Pleasant journey!" Then he bumped into Merrick, grunted some kind of apology, and walked away.

Merrick looked at the motto again. "The stars my camp," he repeated. "Me for that."

This cruiser was about to leave—undoubtedly Earthbound—with choice high-paying passengers. Meanwhile, the law would be converging on him soon. But he had his pay—sufficient for passage, even on this craft. Back on Earth, he'd return to the Ozarks, or perhaps would hunt for a less carefully policed haven in South America or Africa. It was an inspiration, and with men like Patch Merrick, inspiration generally means action.

He stepped in, as assuredly as if he owned a controlling interest in spaceways.

Four persons were inside, none looking. An elegant officer was forward at the controls. A heavy, middle-aged man and a slender young woman bent over some maplike papers near the officer. All three wore expensive space-travel clothes — tunics, slacks, metal-soled shoes. A white-robed Martian unpacked luggage on a settee aft.

"Close the hatch," called the officer without turning his head, and Merrick did so.

Then came the purr of the rocket-ignition, the upswing of the takeoff. The journey had begun.

Merrick chose an armchair, neither the best nor the worst, and sat down. He relaxed, but for an instant only.

Something like a stiff jolt of electricity shot through him. He looked up, more guiltily than usual with him. The source of the shock became mani-

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fest—two of the widest, brightest, grayest eyes in the habitable universe, staring from the most boldly beautiful feminine face he had ever imagined.

"Stowaway aboard," announced a lofty contralto voice.

THEY were all looking at Patch now, in the lofty and accusing manner which judges and policemen and solid citizen-cogs of Thirtieth Century machine civilization were apt to employ toward Patch Merrick. He gave them back stares in all directions, yearning to start the primitive and outmoded fistic violence with which he usually met such an attitude. But they were too many for him—too well armed.

The officer had set and locked his controls, rising from them with an electro-automatic pistol in his lean right hand. The heavy-set man beside the girl had also drawn a weapon—a small ray thrower. The Martian, slipping up on the other side of Merrick's chair, gripped in his tentacles a rocket-clinker bar, very serviceable as a club.

Merrick, outnumbered and outclassed, chose to remain seated.

"Wrong," he answered the girl's accusation. "I came aboard at the last minute. But I have money"—he showed it—"to pay my passage to Earth."

"Earth?" echoed the middle-aged man. He was dressed richly, flashily, in loose-folded tunic that disguised his portly paunch, and his grizzled hair was brushed truculently back. "By what trick of your imagination, my friend, do you think we're going to Earth?"

"Where else would a luxury cruiser be headed?" demanded Merrick in turn. "Not the Jovian System—no luxury there. And Venus is in opposition, clear on the other side of the sun. As for Mars, we've just left it."

"My friend, we are going to none of those places," slurred the Martian in his ear. The shaggy chrysanthemum-shaped head stooped close to Merrick's. The bladder body erect on rear tentacles, sheathed in the white robe, teetered negligently. Only that clinker bar looked like a threat. "This is a private and personal trip. You are not wanted aboard."

"Let's take him back to Ekadome," said the girl.

Her eyes still raked Merrick, like two disintegrator beams digging into his vitals. She tossed back thick waves of hair, so darkly brown that it looked walnut. He might have admired her under happier circumstances, but there was no time for that now.

He rose to his feet, protesting.

"Just a moment. I heard the port official that just left you down there. Aren't you specially cleared, beyond regulations? Doesn't that mean more red tape to be cut, if you go back."

"He's right," spoke up the officer dispassionately. "He wandered aboard without consulting authorities. It'll take hours of explanation, another special takeoff order and so on."

"Then boot him out into space," rejoined the girl. Merrick disliked her at once.

He flexed his muscles.

"If you try that, somebody will get hurt," he promised. "I'm pretty big, pretty strong, and I'm fit. Just came off a months-long cruise as spaceman first-class."

"Spaceman first-class?" interrupted the gray man. He stepped close to the officer, and they conferred in whispers. Then he addressed Merrick again: "You can stay. But you'll have to work."

"Work?" sniffed Merrick, as one who dislikes the word and all it means.

"Exactly. You're here without permission. If you stay, you'll agree to our terms. Each member of this private party has been assigned tasks. My daughter"—he indicated the gray-eyed girl— "volunteered to supervise the engines. She knows a lot about them, but it isn't fit work for her. So you're assigned. Your name?"

"Merrick. What's yours? And where are we bound?"

"Cut the questions, Merrick," snapped the lean officer. "You're subordinate here, and there's plenty for you to do without any more jabber."

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CHAPTER II

Small New World

IT WAS the Martian, seemingly the most kindly of the lot, who gave Merrick information later in the day. While Merrick trimmed the fuel-mixing gauges, the flower-faced creature told him a brief story.

The gray-haired man was Coburn Conti, wealthy retired director of Spaceways, Inc. The girl was Conti's only daughter, Morgana. Merrick seemed to remember hearing of her, as a society spark and a mechanical hobbyist of note. The Martian called himself Rrlan, a retired space-mercantile magnate like Conti, and a space-trotter by taste.

"Sometime ago, I passed near an asteroid," he explained. "It was small—not five Earth miles through—but it had air, water, vegetation. I told Conti, and we agreed that it would be worth our while to make a personal exploration and claim."

Merrick was immediately and intensely interested. He would enjoy going to a new item of nature like the little habitable world described, being the first to visit and stand upon it. But what would such an adventure mean to a man like Conti, who took this prize luxury craft of the Spaceways fleet and made the expedition into a languid outing?

"Why do you want that asteroid?" he asked Rrlan.

The flower-head wagged and there was a shrug where Terrestrials had shoulders. "Mr. Conti is idle. Needs occupation, interests. The same with his daughter. This expedition—"

Expedition! Thought Merrick scornfully. Fine silken expedition, with soft chairs and a space-cruiser like a baby buggy. At that, it wasn't any too well supplied. For instance, the Contis and their officer, Captain Hill, made it plain that the Terrestrial food was enough for only three.

Since Merrick had come aboard unbidden, he must make out on synthetics from the store shipped for Rrlan. The diet was nourishing and sufficient, but unappetizing—pellets of protein and carbohydrates, with papery sheets of roughage and sips of vitamin extract.

For the rest, Merrick had plenty to do. Conti had been right—fuel engineering aboard even the best-appointed space ship was a little tedious and dirty for a wealthy young woman. Between whiles he was arbitrarily made a servant of by Conti, sweeping and cleaning, and at mealtimes serving the Terrestrail provisions he was forbidden to eat.

Captain Hill, who wanted relief at the controls, gave him boresome instruction in handling the ship, a mechanical occupation that Merrick silently scorned as being far from the green nature he loved. And Morgana Conti noticed him not at all.

Only Rrlan was sociable with him, but from the conversation of the others he pieced out more of the expedition's history. For one thing, Rrlan and Conti had once been business rivals, but the gigantic enterprise of Spaceways had beaten and absorbed Rrlan's smaller interworld shipping interest. Rrlan, perforce, had taken a subordinate position with Spaceways, and had become Conti's associate and friend. Both loved to call themselves adventurers and scientists. Now both had retired from active duty, and welcomed the chance to follow up Rrlan's report of the habitable asteroid.

Merrick grunted over his chores: "Adventurers, my eye! The only real space-adventures left are beyond the Solar System. A long jump to Alpha Centauri, perhaps. Four light-years in space, with who knows what at the end. That would be worth the try."

"More work and less mumbling," snapped Captain Hill at him.

IT TOOK rather less than a week to gain the asteriod belt, and a full ten days of coasting along its curving procession of little rock-lumps before Rrlan announced that they were in a proper latitude of space. Televisors were set, Captain Hill dogged the controls, and Conti, his daughter, and Rrlan all worked overtime as look-

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outs. Merrick, as usual, was at work —polishing metal fixtures—when the goal was sighted.

"Did I not say it was there?" Rrlan trumpeted through his artificial voice-box. "Look—air, water, vegetable growth."

Merrick hurried from his task. He saw over the shoulders of others and into the television screen—a patch of the sky with, in its center, the green sphere of the asteroid. It looked like a circular patch of green velvet upon a rectangle of star-dusted black. Only one glance had Merrick, before Hill angrily shouted him back to his duties.

Merrick felt his blood boil and churn with rebellious anger, then it subsided in temperature but still ran fast. His companions, intent on the screen, had all turned their backs toward a nearby shelf on which lay something — Conti's pistol-gripped ray-thrower, small but powerful and deadly. Merrick darted out a long arm and seized the weapon, sliding it under his tunic. A moment later, the ship began to vibrate and its floor-plates to press against the boot-soles of its occupants as it slacked speed and prepared to ground.

"What a beautiful sight," Morgana Conti was exulting, as she hovered over the screen. "Brooks of water—look, they make little silver veins in the green. It's a paradise."

"It is also a sheer lump of wealth," added her father. He faced Rrlan with a triumphant grin. "You never thought of that, eh, Rrlan? But so much gravity in so little solidity—"

Rrlan's face-petals seemed to come to attention all over his cranium, and the tentacles stirred under his robe. "You mean, uranium, gold—things like that?"

"I deduce a rarer substance yet," cried Conti excitedly. "Neutronium, the ultimate compression of atoms!" His grin broadened. "We can make it only with great trouble and expense, in our artificial-gravity machines. But it's plainly natural here, as in dwarf stars. We can create a mighty fortune—and I've made the discovery, I'll dominate!"

Rrlan fidgeted. "You thought of this before?"

"Oh, plenty," agreed Conti. "But I wanted to get here first." He wagged a finger in mockery of arch admonition. "You aren't one to think of commercial importances, Rrlan. We proved that to you when you were in business for yourself, eh? So I didn't remind you, or you might have ruled me out and taken the profits for yourself."

The Martian gestured gracefully with a tentacle. "Wisely planned, Mr. Conti. Well, it is too late for me to exclude you, even if I wished. Shall we work and develop the project together?"

AS HE spoke, the ship settled down with a thud. Captain Hill fussed with the gauge that announced the composition of the outside atmosphere. "Oxygen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide," he reported. "Amazing! Proportions and pressure as on Earth itself. All safe!"

The hatchway opened. A pleasant freshness of air stole in. Conti took his daughter's hand.

"We'll go first," he announced. "Come on, Captain. You too, Rrlan."

The Contis, then Hill, passed through the main outer hatch. Merrick finished his last bit of metal wiping.

"Merrick," slurred Rrlan close beside him.

Merrick turned. "Yes?"

"You would like to set foot on solid ground again. They did not order you to remain inside. You can go out, if you wish."

Merrick felt a bit of warmth in his heart for the Martian who had been the only member of the company to take notice or thought for him.

"Thanks," he said, and walked to the hatchway. He stepped out into a meadow of sweet greenery, almost fluffy in its rich but delicate profusion. Hill and the Contis were moving rapidly, interestedly ahead. The asteroid's close horizon bore only a few bushy tussocks, and a pondlike collection of water at a little distance reflected the blue sky.

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Merrick grinned without much mirth.

Once again they were all ignoring him, were scuttling out over the tiny meadowy face of this impossible worldlet. Morgana and her father bent to look at some of the grassy greenness, Captain Hill hurried to join them and argue.

Patch Merrick slipped a hand inside his tunic, where the ray-thrower nestled. Now was the time to cover them, speak his piece, throw off this contemptuous bondage put upon him. Hill must have a weapon, but if he drew it, Merrick would ray it out of his hand. After that, into the cruiser, away—

But the cruiser was away without him. Forgotten himself, Merrick had forgotten about Rrlan.

The ship took off smoothly, gently, almost suavely. Merrick had just time to turn around and see it already out of reach. The others came running back with a babbled chorus of cries.

Thirty yards above them, a brake-rocket sang briefly and heliocopter vanes churned into action. The cruiser idled. The port nearest the controls opened, and the pink blossom that was Rrlan's head poked out.

"Mr. Conti!" he slurred loudly. "Can you hear me?"

"Of course I can, you idiot!" roared back the magnate. "What is this, some far-fetched Martian joke?"

"No, no joke," called back Rrlan. "Far-fetched — that describes you. Yes! I am marooning you all!"

They gaped and fell silent. Rrlan continued: "Martians do not forget—do not forgive. You are a wise operator of money, Conti. You beat me once, and I knew that if I were to get even I must take some other way."

"Rrlan!" called Morgana. "You're holding that old business rivalry against my father? But Spaceways took you in, gave you a job."

"Yes! A subordinate job, when I had been my own master!" Into the mechanical tone crept venom. "I swallowed it, and planned. This asteroid is my own invention! A hidden gravity machine will make it habitable—as long as the fuel holds out."

Patch Merrick raised his voice: "You can't do this, Rrlan."

Again Rrlan twittered. "Sorry for you, Merrick. I think you are honest, brave. If you were neither, I might have offered you a chance to come with me."

"I have to do it," muttered Merrick, and whipped out the ray-thrower and stabbed upward with a streak of killing white light.

It struck the open port, involving the outthrust pink blossom-head of Rrlan and driving past to the interior. There was a noise like an acre of sheet metal crumpling in a giant's hand. Then all four of the Terrestrials were running madly to avoid the slipping tumble of the space ship. It came down with a rock-jarring thump, and its engines whispered no more.

CHAPTER III

Merrick Takes Over

BACK the four came. The hatch was locked from inside, and Merrick boosted lean Captain Hill through the porthole Rrlan had opened for his fatal moment of mockery. The captain hammered inside for a time, then came out through the hatch.

"Controls fused by that ray," he said accusingly to Merrick. "No possible repairs. No proper tools or spare parts."

"What about Rrlan?" asked Merrick gruffly.

Hill snapped his fingers. "Dead. Of course."

Merrick scowled. "The one person who treated me with anything like decency. His last words were a backhanded compliment. I hated to do that." He narrowed his eyes above the ray-thrower, and weighed it thoughtfully in his hand. "But he'd have escaped if I hadn't rayed him."

"It would have been better if he had," put in Conti. "The space patrol very probably would have picked him up, seen the ship was stolen, and come looking."

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"Far-fetched," snapped Merrick, scowling the blacker. "As it is, we've got the cruiser."

"No better than a wreck," grumbled Captain Hill.

"But a wreck full of food and other supplies," reminded Merrick, "with tanks of fuel, to keep the gravity engine running." His voice grew stern. "Quit trying to make it look as if I did you a dirty trick."

Morgana now spoke, her gray eyes raking Merrick.

"Where did you get that ray-thrower? It looks like Dad's."

"Of course it's his. That is, it *was* his. I've taken it over." He faced Hill quickly. "Don't touch that pocket. Hands up, or I'll let you have it!"

Hill glared at the levelled ray-thrower, and lifted his strong, sinewy hands.

"Turn your back," ordered Merrick. Stepping close, he relieved the skipper of an electro-automatic. "Now, then, shall we be sensible?"

"How sensible?" demanded Conti.

"Oh, I know it'll be hard for you to show or absorb any sense," flashed Merrick heatedly, "but let's call off all bets and snubs. We're four people, healthy and sane, on a small, habitable crumb of solid matter. We have some equipment and provisions. Let's divide assets and labors equally. We may get somewhere."

"Get somewhere!" echoed Morgana scornfully, with a flash of her gray eyes. "Where can we get from here—from this asteroid?"

"I did have an idea," groaned Conti, "but it only half worked."

All turned toward him, and he continued dolefully: "I wrote a brief account of what we expected to do—this asteroid's probable appearance and condition, and so on—and gave it to my secretary, sealed. He was to turn it over to publicity sources as soon as we returned."

"But that's great," applauded Hill. "When we don't turn up in the specified time—"

"I specified no time," Conti objected mournfully. "And my secretary's the sort who'll obey orders. He'll keep that thing for years, perhaps decades."

"Then forget it," summed up Merrick. "We're here. We can live here, healthy and reasonably happy. Rrlan figured on our deaths—the gravity would give out, the air go, and we'd smother as we floated off into space. But that's delayed, at least. The ship's fuel will give us gravity for many months."

"The food won't last many months," objected Conti, almost triumphantly as if he was glad to find flaws in Merrick's scheme.

FOR answer, Merrick stooped and caught up a blade of grass from the meadow on which they stood.

"You were looking at this a second ago? Did you take the trouble to identify it? I did, at a glance. I judge that Rrlan went to a Terrestrial grain merchant for the seeds that would make this place look fertile and fruitful. Convenient for him, and lucky for us. This is Scotch barley. Other stuff mixed in." He stooped again. "This looks like buckwheat, and this other—"

Captain Hill leaped upon his bent back.

It was a plucky assault by a man of action and caught Merrick off guard. Conti cheered as the two sprawled together. Had he rushed to help instead of cheering, Merrick might have been subdued and disarmed on the spot. But in the second of falling, the big vagabond went on the defensive. He blocked a kick with crossed arms, caught Hill's ankle and threw him violently underneath. A moment later, he sprang up and, as Hill tried to rise in turn, struck him in the mouth. Hill went down, rose again shakily, and fell a second time from a better-planted blow. Merrick found time to draw his captured electro-automatic.

"I ought to kill you," he scolded Hill. "That's mutiny, rebellion."

Hill sat up, spitting blood. "You talk like the chief here," he mumbled.

"I am. I've just elected myself. That is what I always looked for—a place far from civilization, where I could live by and with nature." He grinned. "Fate's handed me a package. Well, lady and gents, does my election stand?"

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Hill spat again, rose and stood with bowed head. He was accepting. Conti made a glum gesture of submission. But Morgana smiled, not wholly in mockery.

"I cast my vote for you, too," she announced. "You seem to be the only one who has the knowledge to meet this situation."

"Knowledge?" repeated Merrick. "Who said anything about knowledge? I'm as dumb as any of you. But I'm happy about this situation, and you aren't. That puts me on top." He pocketed the weapon. "Let's get to work."

He spoke as if there were needed only a brisk, brief effort of toil to establish them in comfort and safety. But there was much to do. Merrick really didn't know how much, or where to start. He took a chance.

"Provisions are most important," he ventured with a show of official dispassion. "Let's look at what's in the lockers."

"Barely enough for a couple of weeks," grumbled Conti. "We figured rations pretty close."

"You're not counting the synthetics Rrlan brought," reminded Morgana.

Conti made a wry face. "Who could eat those?" he asked.

"I could, and I did," Merrick reminded him. "Let's check up, I say. If I'm to be chief, I don't want to speak twice about anything else."

THAT had its effect, and they entered the ship together. A search of Rrlan's personal lockers produced huge containers of synthetic concentrates, enough for a long fugitive voyage such as he must have planned. There were pills, concentrates, tablets, and bottles of ill-tasting but healthful acid purees. Merrick surveyed the haul hopefully.

"Plenty of food here," he announced. "Morgana!"

It shocked them all to hear the vagabond call her by her first name, and so crisply, but she came to attention.

"Well, governor?" she replied in cheerful mockery.

"You were the readiest to say you'd take my orders. Suppose you divide this truck into rations. Make them slim and see how far they'll stretch. I'd like to see four weeks' meals won out of them."

"Shall I fetch the food from our lockers, too?" she inquired.

Merrick shook his head. "Oh, no. That's dessert. Not enough for even a taste per meal. It'll be doled out a trifle at a time, for special occasions. And I"—he tapped himself on the chest—"am going to do the doling. Nobody gets extra helpings. Nobody gets left out. Agreed?"

The two men nodded grudging approval of the thought, but Morgana drew herself up. "You sound as if you don't trust us with the decent food."

"That's just what I don't trust you with," replied Merrick bluntly. "And, after a few scoffings of Rrlan's synthetics, I'll trust you less." He addressed Hill. "Next in importance is the fuel. Come with me."

Here, again, the supply was good. Merrick's snapshot with the ray might well have involved the feed lines and exploded the tanks, but it had not. The two men detached one tank from its brackets and carried it away, looking for Rrlan's gravity machine. They found it, neither far off nor well hidden, in a deep crack of the rocks—a humming, grinding, sparking mass of wheels and pistons and terminals, the size of a barrel. Detaching the machine's fuel container, which was almost empty, they coupled on the fresh supply.

"What about the day all our fuel gives out?" demanded Hill.

"We'll have figured out something," Merrick told him, with an assurance he did not feel. "Now let's get back to the ship."

CHAPTER IV

The Only Girl

THEY rejoined Conti and his daughter, who stood outside the open port from which Rrlan had looked and sneered his last.

"Rrlan was a fellow creature, after all," Conti began solemnly. "Bad

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from the bottom up, of course, but a thinker, an intelligent being. Do you think some sort of funeral services—"

Captain Hill, who had been inside, looked glum. "That ray of Merrick's didn't leave enough of him to make a funeral worth while. Well, the gravity machine's in shape for the present. What next?"

"What next, Governor?" echoed Morgana, impaling Merrick with a sardonic grey stare.

Merrick had an answer ready. He pointed to the shin-high greenery around their feet.

"Nothing but to wait for that to ripen. Barley, buckwheat, some corn—"

"All mixed up," finished Conti pessimistically. "What then? Cereal stew?"

"We'll unmix them," Merrick informed him. "Don't glower. I know it'll be labor—tedious, long. But we're back to first principles. We'll cut the grain as it ripens, and sort it—wheat in one measure, barley in another, and so on. Next season, we'll have patches of the various grains."

"Next season," repeated Morgana softly. "For a while, we thought there'd be no next season. Governor, I think we ought to thank the utmost depths of the heavens that you stowed away with us."

Captain Hill turned his straight back with every appearance of disgust. Conti cleared his throat, and his heavy face grew as red as a distant view of Mars. Morgana stepped closer to Merrick. A little breeze from somewhere stirred the walnut-brown waves of her hair.

"You've decided e v e r y t h i n g, arranged for everything," she fairly cooed. "Disposed of Rrlan, puzzled out the emergency, planned an economy that will keep us going indefinitely. Now, aren't you a trifle fatigued? Wouldn't you like to forget all this toil?"

"Probably I can't afford to forget it, Miss Morgana," he answered uncomfortably. Her quiet, deep laugh ran his discomfort up another notch.

"I think," she said, coming closer still, "that our conversation is either boring or disgusting my father and Captain Hill. There isn't much privacy on this little crumb of the cosmos, but there *is* the other side of the wreck. Coming, Governor?"

Her hand glided through the crook of his right arm. Merrick felt as if his elbow had been rayed with a quarter-strength disintegrator. His face, he judged, was one shade less crimson than Conti's. He let Morgana steer him away past the silent rocket tubes of the *Omen's* stern, and along the far flank of the craft. The two of them gazed away across the green lake of unripened grain.

"I think that a cat stowed away with us, too," Morgana was teasing him, in a soft voice. "At least something has got your tongue, Governor."

MERRICK gulped. "Please," he managed roughly, "my name's not 'Governor.' It's Patch Merrick."

"Ah," she rejoined, "Mr. Cross Patch Merrick. He has no time for girls—not even when the girl in question is literally the only girl in the world."

That was true. Merrick hadn't thought of it before. Morgana Conti, proud and bold and beautiful, heiress to a fortune now unreachable, was the only female on the asteroid where they were all likely to remain forever.

"I'm being practical," she went on. "I'm the only girl. You aren't the only man, but you're the Chief." She smiled dazzlingly. "The inference, Cross Patch, is obvious."

There was silence a couple of seconds, while Merrick tried to remember when any blow of a fist had so staggered him. He could call none to mind, although he had given and received many blows. Not knowing what to say, he said nothing. But Morgana allowed no embarrassed silence to grow heavy around them.

"You see, I'm very frankly appraising you," she announced. "I did have to give it some thought. Captain Hill might be an alternate choice. But I am the only woman and you have no choice, Cross Patch. Hold up your head."

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Patch Merrick felt as if someone

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had bashed him on the head with a club. He was quite right. Just as Morgana Conti's lips touched his, her father came up behind and struck hard.

He woke to a sense of fireworks inside his head. There was water on his face and hair. He tried to sit up and found himself bound—ankles together, arms at his sides.

"No funny business," Conti was cautioning him, "and no hard feelings. You're out of office, ex-Governor Merrick."

Merrick looked up murderously. The three stood over him. Conti was triumphant and smug, Hill stern and poising his recaptured electro-automatic, Morgana ever so slightly abashed. Merrick looked upward, away from them. He saw the ship's motto, upside down. *Astra Castra—Omen nomen.*

"The stars my prison camp," he paraphrased sourly, "and if omen was really my name, I'd have expected that rotten trick."

"Come, you feel well enough to attempt epigrams," approved Conti. "You accept defeat?"

"I accept nothing," Merrick snapped, spitting among the grain spears.

"You will eventually," said Conti. "No hard feelings, I say. It's just business competition, Merrick. You won for a while. I was under-dog, but I saw your value and turned it to account. I"—and he became superior—"waited for you to work out the details of survival, and you did it well. Then was the time for me to resume my rightful place as head of this group. I was aided by my dutiful and intelligent daughter."

He bowed to Morgana. Merrick relaxed against the threshold of the *Omen* and closed his eyes.

"Get out," he told them. "I'm sick of you all."

HE HEARD footsteps swishing away among the grain. After a moment, Morgana spoke close to him.

"I've stayed, Cross Patch," she said.

He opened his eyes again. "You needn't. You make me even sicker than the others."

"Oh, don't say that!" She focussed her smile on him. "After all, it was Dad's idea. Musn't I obey my Dad? Isn't that first duty?"

"Your first duty is ethics, but probably you don't understand what the word implies."

She lifted her hands to fluff her walnut hair, plainly conscious of the graceful picture she made. "You have duty yourself—to sportsmanship. No hard feelings, as Dad said. We accepted your first victory—"

"I had to beat Captain Hill's ears off," he reminded.

"You'd better let the captain forget that," advised Morgana. "Now, will you cooperate and take orders like a good soldier? Because then we'll untie you."

"No promises," he informed her bleakly. "Promises are awkward to me, because I must keep them—another idea that you probably don't understand. But this isn't the end. It's only the second round. You've won it, as I won the first. Let's see how the third pans out."

"You're one of the most difficult men I ever met," she said wearily, and walked away.

Left alone, Merrick burned. He twisted his head around to examine his bonds from all points. They were lengths of insulated wire, drawn tight in many coils. Captain Hill probably had tied the knots that could never be loosened without pliers.

Patch reviewed the situation. He'd been made a fool of, ambushed and immobilized. The three persons he had previously ruled could now do to him as they wished. He had refused their first term and was being left in these irksome bonds. What then? Would he remain tied all day? For a number of days, perhaps, without food or water? He already began to feel thirsty.

However, he was alone. Again he scrutinized his bonds. Near his left elbow, a loose end trailed from a knot, separating into two unravelled strands, with the inner wire exposed at the tips. From this he could see that the strand was double, each strand of stout solid copper and securely insulated in rubberoid, then the

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two strands sheathed in an outer tube of fabric. Lighting fixture stuff, judged Merrick, not made to carry a great load of current.

Not made to carry a great load—Inspiration!

He glanced this way and that. His captors had departed, trusting those bonds. Merrick rolled over on his face, rose to his knees, and managed to hoist himself erect. Hopping on his bound feet, he gained the open door of the wreck and clumsily flipped himself inside.

NO CUTTING instrument appeared to hand, none that he could employ against copper. More in line with his inspiration was the electric range in the galley aft. He hopped in that direction. The range was shut off, but he stooped and, grimly prodding with his nose, pushed buttons to start two heaters. They glowed redly, side by side.

He turned his left elbow, with the unravelled loose end. After several attempts, he jockeyed one strand-tip into a heater. It glowed, seemed to adhere. Getting the other tip into the second burner was more difficult, but he succeeded.

"Now for a short," he muttered.

Near his other elbow, a sharp metal hook sprouted from the wall, with a pan hung to it. A twitch, a rising on the toes, and he caught another strand of his bonds on that sharp point. He put weight on it, forcing the hook to perforate the insulation. He bore down.

A shuddering vibration-pang, comparable only to Morgana Conti's kiss shot through him. He spun on his tied feet and fell at full length. His wits were blurred, but he struggled against the bonds, and they gave.

Where the metal hook had set up a short circuit, the wires had partially fused and oxidized. His strength had torn the wires at that point, and he shrugged the coils from his body, then untied his ankles. Rising, he thriftily turned off the electric range.

There was water in the cooler, and he drank. He felt better. "Survival of the fittest!" he muttered aloud. "I feel mighty fit. First Captain Hill—he'll be the toughest. Then Conti. And Morgana—something special for her. When I hear from her next—"

At that moment he heard from her, a wild shriek. It was followed by cries from both the men with her, seemingly from just outside the ship.

CHAPTER V

Visitors

MERRICK made it from the galley to the open hatch in two jumps, and around the stern of the *Omen* in five or six more. He saw what the yelling was about, and uttered an exclamation that he would never want remembered as his last word; but he did not slow his rush.

Near the pond a few yards away, the heads of the other three members of the expedition were visible, their heads and no more—sprouting from soggy turf like strange fungi. Their faces dripped mud and writhed with terror.

"Get back!" Morgana yelled. "Stay clear, you fool—we're caught, being sucked down!"

She ducked out of sight momentarily, then struggled upward as high as her chin, muddier than ever. Merrick halted, up to his shins in mud beneath the sward. He saw that rank grain-growth mid open water, and that all three victims struggled hard with flailings of arms and hands to keep their mouths above the surface. Such struggles had scattered bits of the masking growth, throwing some to solid ground. Merrick stooped quickly and seized a piece.

It was a tussock of grain blades, grown on soil that stuck to a piece of wood—balsa, from Earth's tropics, lighter than cork.

"Don't stand there like an idiot, man!" gurgled Conti. "Get us out!"

Merrick tore off his tunic and, holding one sleeve, tried to throw the other within reach of Morgana. It was not long enough, and to lengthen the garment he quickly unfastened a shoe—made of stout cloth, with regulation deck sole of flexible steel. A

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strap turned several times around the ankle and when straightened made a respectable length. Fastening it to a sleeve, he tried again.

"Here, catch," he called, and tossed the shoe toward Morgana.

She made a grab, missed. The shoe sank—not like a stone, but like a diving trout. Merrick tried to draw it back, and was almost hurled flat. He let go of the tunic in time to preserve his balance. The garment was drawn almost hungrily below the surface.

"So that's it!" he snapped. "Keep fighting, you three, and talk. What happened?"

Morgana, pale and fagged, achieved an answer. "I broke through, they jumped in to save me—got caught somehow."

Merrick was wrenching his other shoe off. "Hill," he called, "tell me—did she sink clear out of sight? And come up only when you two went in after her?"

Hill nodded, his face set in lines of despairing effort.

"You're all wearing metal-soled deck shoes?" pursued Merrick. "Yes? Then hold on, I'll get you out!"

Shoeless, he dived into the water. Down he went, groped for and found what he had figured he would—a flat, smooth surface, like a loose metal flooring. Catching Morgana by the ankle, he tore loose the fastenings of her shoes, and felt her kick gratefully upward. Paddling under water, he blundered into Conti, and again unfastened shoes that seemed glued to that unsteady flooring. He rose to gulp air, dived again, and freed Hill.

They all came ashore, but only Merrick had the strength to stand on his feet. Conti lay prone, Hill squatted with his hands at his temples, Morgana half-reclined on one elbow. Merrick grinned at them.

"Good thing you underestimated me again," he said. "I got out of your trick wiring just in time to drag you out of this mess."

MORGANA stared fearfully at the pool of danger. Many flounderings exposed it fully for what it was—a water filled pit a dozen feet in diameter, cunningly hidden with patches of turflike growth, floated on slices of balsa. "Wh-what is it?" she quavered.

"When my shoe sank so fast, I saw the whole business," Merrick explained. "Rrlan thought you'd all die, but he couldn't resist a piece of entertainment—a trap that might drown one and perhaps more."

He pointed to the water. "Down below is a good-sized sheet of iron. It's wired for magnetism, probably to the gravity mechanism. We'll check up. Rrlan knew you'd wear steel soles. Anybody who fell in, would be drawn under.

"But you were all together. The three of you, stuck to the magnet at once, were able to drag it a little upward by your combined efforts. But you couldn't have kept up the fight long."

Conti was able to look up. "New chapter for my reminiscences," he mumbled. "Magnate meets magnet. Not a good pun, but—"

"A terrible pun," announced his daughter. "We'd better stop exploring without Cross Patch along to play nursemaid."

She got up, held out a hand to Hill. "Give me that pistol. Quick! And Dad, pass over your ray." They obeyed, and she held out the weapons, butt foremost, to Merrick. "You win, Cross Patch. We're your devoted subjects."

"Hand back those things," Merrick commanded. "The shooting and fighting are over. We each need the others—all the others—to make a go of it. It's nearly supper time. Now let's get back to the ship."

* * * * *

Another day passed on the asteroid. Judging by the growth of beard that lent Conti's round face an air of readiness and outdoor competence, three Earth weeks had passed since the eventful day of the first casting away. Conti was helping his daughter sort spears of ripened grain, reaped from near the *Omen*.

Hill, not so spruce as before, but smooth-shaven, had dismantled from inside the wreck the control unit and parts damaged by Merrick's raying of

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Rrlan. With these strung out on level ground, he was probing and working with wrench and screw driver.

"No good for flight," he announced, "but still chunks of valuable metal." He glanced toward his comrades and their reapings. "For instance, scythes or sickles—maybe spading tools for next season's plantings, and threshing and milling equipment."

"We need a blacksmith," finished Conti. "Who?"

"I'll answer that," said Morgana, looking up. "Cross Patch Merrick. He'll be the blacksmith, just as he's been everything else."

As if summoned by this discussion of him, Merrick appeared, striding through the grain from the direction of the pond. He looked browner and bigger than ever, his face was shaven like Hill's, but his hair was growing into disordered profusion.

"I've solved it," he greeted the others.

They turned toward him, and Morgana rose with a smile. "Solved what, this time?"

"Source of electrical supply. The *Omen's* storage batteries will give out eventually, but"—he pointed back—"you know the little stream that Rrlan made from the pond to keep his man trap full? There's enough rainfall from time to time to keep it running. Well, I've rigged up a waterwheel."

"It can be geared or belted to a generator," amplified Conti. "Quite simple."

MORGANA nodded her head. "Simple after Cross Patch thinks of it." Her gray eyes studied her father. "The company's getting stuffy, Cross Patch. Come take me on a walk."

As once before, she led him around the wreck. Merrick remembered how she had talked to him on the previous occasion. She was talking again.

"No funny business this time, Cross Patch. Look all around. Nobody's sneaking up to slosh you on the head. But I'm still a practical woman, believing in straight talk. You've fixed this asteroid to support us indefinitely. Perhaps forever. But what about us—you and me?"

"We're four people down to first principles, as I explained before," he replied. "I'm chief because I enjoy the situation, the back-to-nature element. It's happiness to me, as it's been tragedy to you others. You'll learn—"

"Will our children learn?" She paused, while he fell silent. Then: "I repeat—you and I are the logical mates. You attract me, and I attract you. Don't try to shrug it off, Cross Patch. I know when men like me. Captain Hill's a space-officer. In this situation, he has authority to perform a marriage ceremony."

Her hands were on his arms, her gray eyes fixing and disconcerting his. He asked, "Is it the man you like, or the chief?"

"Both," she replied. "Both. Well?"

They kissed. As his mouth found hers, Merrick drew himself up, in spite of everything, to endure some kind of blow. What would it be? His instinct was warning him. Morgana's strong arms clamped around him, then suddenly fell away. She stepped backward. Her face was still lifted, her eyes looking beyond and above him.

"Look in the sky," she said tensely. "A ship!"

He, too, looked. A brilliant torpedo shape had appeared there.

"Red and white blazon," Morgana said. "Interplanetary police."

She turned and hurried from him, around the wreck.

"Dad!" she cried, almost hysterically. "Captain Hill! We've been found, we're saved!"

The police ship came down gently and slowly, but with the utter grace of a well-made, well-flown craft. Rockets cut; almost died. The bottom of the hull settled within scant yards of the *Omen*.

A hatch opened, and out stepped a young officer with an electro-automatic rifle. Two space-troopers followed, then two more, then a final two, all armed and alert.

"Ahoy!" called the young commander. "Are you all right? Who's in charge here?"

Conti did not even glance around to see if Merrick was present. He

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strode to the front.

"I'm in charge here," he announced.

The officer of the new arrival was Lieutenant Duckett, genial and respectful to Conti and quite frankly admiring toward Morgana. He stated his errand as soon as he had introduced himself:

"Luck brought us here. You intended to make a secret trip, but when necessity arose we traced you."

"Traced us?" echoed Hill sharply. "How?"

"Through Mr. Conti's anticipatory account, left sealed to be given to the newscaster agencies when you returned. We learned of it, commanded—"

"Of course!" cried Conti. "My office had to give it up. That gave you only a hint, though."

Lieutenant Duckett nodded. "A hint was enough. We could look for a small, green asteroid, with atmosphere and water. We were bound to find you sooner or later. It's been sooner, rather than later."

"It certainly has," nodded Morgana, and gave the lieutenant one of her looks that made him wriggle and grin in an unpolicemanly manner. "But how were you so clever? How did you know we were cast away?"

DUCKETT looked honestly puzzled. "Cast away?" he repeated.

Silence. Conti, Morgana and Hill stared at each other. "But aren't you a rescue ship?" demanded Morgana.

"We're a police detail. We're after a last-minute addition to your party."

"Last minute add—" Morgana began, and then fell silent.

Duckett produced papers. He became formal and professional. "Name of Merrick. Six feet or over, hundred and eighty-five pounds Earth weight, black curly hair, young, surly manner. Police record on Earth. Accused of unprovoked and barbarous assaults on superior officers. Serious crime. Probably he'll catch penal servitude for— Can't say how long." He looked up. "We know he ducked away and hid somewhere on the Ekadome landing stage at almost the exact time your craft was cleared. Since we couldn't ferret him out elsewhere, it became evident that he had joined you, as a workaway or a stowaway. Well, is he here?"

"He's here," said Conti gruffly, and shut his mouth tight. His round, bearded face looked suddenly square and hard.

Morgana looked around for Merrick. He was nowhere in sight. Again she riveted the young lieutenant with her grey eyes.

"At this point," she purred, "won't you step aside, Lieutenant Duckett? I have something to say about this man Merrick. There are points in his nature you may not quite understand."

"I'm sure of that," agreed Duckett, almost sickeningly cordial. "Well, if you really think there are things I should know—"

She put her hand on his arm, and they strolled a few paces from the others. Morgana began to speak earnestly and quietly. Lieutenant Duckett's face took on a peculiar expression, half dazed and half rueful. Conti, observing, narrowed his eyes.

He had seen that expression on the faces of so many young men—young men being bombarded by his daughter's five thousand and one charms until they were driven to courses they did not like and did not want to take. Morgana was having something to say on behalf of Patch Merrick.

Conti turned and strolled away himself. He walked between the two ships, and in through the open hatchway of the *Omen*.

CHAPTER VI

Close Shave

MERRICK had been working like a souped-up robot ever since the police had landed. He had not needed the statement of Lieutenant Duckett to know what had brought the ship here. Nor had he paused to heed Duckett's surmise as to what fate awaited him back at Ekadome. He was trying to work a way out—tricky and hasty, but still a way out.

The wreck of the *Omen* wasn't a wreck, really—it needed only new

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control mechanism. The police craft, being liable to experience battle and damage, would have spare parts. Merrick had sneaked into the new-arrived vessel, plundered its machine lockers and found what he wanted.

Just as he lugged it back to the *Omen*, he heard Conti's step. He tried to hide his finds under a tarpaulin, but too late.

"Stand easy, Merrick," Conti bade him. "You're under arrest."

Merrick turned. The magnate held a ray-thrower on him. "Is this square, Conti?" asked Merrick. "Twice I've saved your life."

"You did me no favors, Merrick. We were operating as a castaway community—you pointed that out. It was group interest that I, or anybody else, be preserved to help maintain the others."

Merrick gestured acknowledgment of the point. "The police—

"They don't know where you are—yet. I'll take you to them." Conti's hand tensed on the ray-thrower. "If you try to be violent, I'd welcome the chance to—"

Merrick's disdainful smile broadened. "No, Conti. I'll go out yonder—and die fighting. Let the police wipe me out, if they can. I'll make it public and dramatic. You and Hill watch—*and* Morgana."

He saw Conti flinch at mention of his daughter's name. That was all he needed. He went on: "If I die this next instant, you can't brush aside what's passed between Morgana and me."

Conti's face, orange-red, grew grey and dim as a winter moon. "She'll forget you, when you're in a Martian prison."

"If I get there. But if I die fighting — Morgana never saw anything like that. She'll remember it forever. So will the police, and the people who hear the story when it's published."

"You're a skunk," growled Conti.

"If you're comparing me to a fierce, independent animal, that makes things most unpleasant when it's crowded," replied Merrick, "you're right. Shall we join the group outside?"

He tramped to the door.

As he gained the open, he saw Morgana and the lieutenant still talking, lieutenant half-doleful and half-fawning, Morgana thoroughly triumphant. At sight of him, she cried his name joyfully:

"Cross Patch! Come here—I've got something to tell you!"

He paused, planting his feet hard, to meet whatever trouble came. But it was Morgana who ran to him ahead of Duckett, and her arms shot out and tightened upon him.

"It's going to be all right," she told him all in a rush. "I've explained fully to Lieutenant Duckett, and he understands."

"Perfectly," said Duckett.

"He thinks you're a hero," breathed Morgana. "A regular empire-building folklore hero."

"I do," agreed the lieutenant.

"You say that society—civilization—made you a vagabond," she charged on. "But now I'm on your side, and I'm an important figure in society and civilazation. Now that this foolishness is cleared up where you're concerned—"

"Pardon," said Duckett, "but I didn't go that far, Miss Conti. I can't. I agree that Merrick is a wonder, and a man who deserves sympathy. But my orders won't allow me to do more than express that sympathy. He must go back to stand trial and—"

If Merrick had not had to pause and unfasten Morgana's clasp, he might indeed have leaped fast enough to catch Duckett off guard. But the lieutenant saw him coming, drew a pistol and clubbed him with it. A moment later, other police were avalanching upon him. One pointed a gas thrower.

"You cowards!" Morgana was crying. "You brutes! I wish he'd kill you all!"

Merrick smelled the gas, and drifted away into dreamland.

HE WOKE in a cell, seven feet by four. This would be the police craft. Yes, through a barred grating looked the face of Duckett.

"Awake, Merrick?" he asked. "Visitor."

Merrick rose from the cot where he found himself lying and came to the

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door. Conti was outside.

"I'm doing what I can," Conti said. "It's not much—here. It'll be plenty when we're back to civilization."

"Civilization!" groaned Merrick. "It's got me again. But you were the one who wanted to turn me over to my fate. Why do you line up with me now?"

"My daughter," said Conti. "She has her heart set on you." He lowered his voice. "Be ready to escape. I'll help."

He was gone, as Duckett strolled up again.

Merrick went back and sat on his cot. Later, a policeman brought him supper on a tray. It was better food than he had eaten for weeks, but he did not relish it. He was too mystified to have an appetite.

He finished, and the policeman took away his dishes. Duckett came to the bars to talk.

"Wish you hadn't been violent at the last," he said. "I might have been able to make a report in your favor, back at Ekadome. As it is—" He turned suddenly. "Oh, Miss Conti. I thought that was you."

Merrick knew how the impact of those grey eyes on the back of your neck could turn you around. Duckett walked eagerly to Morgana, who waited down the corridor. They spoke softly, smilingly. Then they walked away into the open.

Merrick sat on his cot once more. He was left alone. Probably forever. Sold out, discarded, forgotten by Morgana and all others.

What sizzled at his elbow? He turned and looked. There was a tiny spot of scorched black on the enamel of the bulkhead. It grew, darkened, became a hole. Someone was cutting the metal quietly with a disintegrator ray.

He drew to one side and watched. The hole was big now.

"Ssst!" muttered the voice of Conti. "It's night out here. Morgana's keeping the lieutenant's attention from you, slip out as soon as this hole has grown big enough. I've repaired the *Omen* with those parts you stole. We're making a dash for it."

Under the clear stars Conti led Merrick to the hatchway of the *Omen*.

"I'll be scolded for that," he chuckled, "but my reputation and influence can stand it. Anyway, I've got you—and you, my boy, will make it up to me."

"However I can," replied Merrick feelingly. "Where away now?"

"Earth, of course. Martian law can't touch you there."

"Earth!" repeated Merrick. "The Ozarks, where I built my hut."

"No," said Morgana, joining them. "New York, St. Louis, Paris, Cairo. The big places, where things are doing."

She and Conti came up close to Merrick on either side. Both grinned happily over him.

"Daughter," Conti was saying, "I fought against this idea, but now believe it's right. Now we've got him, I know he'll be valuable. After the wedding, you'll be made vice-president, Merrick—learn the business, all the ropes."

"Oh," said Merrick. "Then you've changed your mind. Maybe there's a place for me among your safe, easy, soft men, the men who need luxury rockets and palace hotels and servants to bring their food and lace their boots?"

"A place for you *over* those soft, easy men," Conti assured him. "After these charges have blown over on Mars, we'll send you—"

"Dad," said Morgana, "Cross Patch looks worried. That's his way when he thinks the rules are broken. Let me talk to him."

Conti drew aside, strolling toward the police rocket. Morgana put her hand on Merrick's arm.

"Is Cross Patch cross?" she purred. "Even when I'm going to be the sort of person you want?"

He furrowed his brow in the gloom. "In those silk-lined society dives? Can you?"

"I could have brought it off here," she reminded. "You said so."

"Because you and I are bigger than this lost crumb of a world. But civilization on Earth, Mars, Venus—"

"We'll be bigger than that, too. I'll show you there, as you showed me here." She was close, and her voice

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sang with command. "I needed you here. You'll need me there. Oh, just a little polish, a little teaching, and you'll devastate them, Cross Patch. No woman but will envy me at the balls and receptions—no man but will imitate you."

Merrick shuddered. "Listen," he said suddenly, "go and find your Father. Tell him I'm ready with my answer to you both."

She kissed him lightly, and with assurance. "Answer!" she repeated. "Only one answer you can give, Cross Patch," and she walked away.

Abruptly he stepped into the *Omen,* tugged shut the hatchway, hurried to the controls, fairly hurled himself into the seat. His fingers found the keys, struck a full chord.

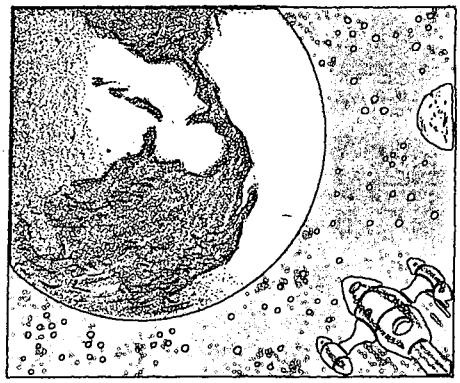
Shudder—leap—he was in the air, beyond air, in space. Behind him the police would be hurrying to pursuit. He'd have to make full speed to distance them. Full speed he strove for achieved. Now where?

Jupiter had two moons, Saturn three, that were warm, forested, with few settlers and no laws. One of those he'd choose when he had time. The important thing was, he'd escaped from Conti, civilization, the police. And Morgana.

Morgana! She had kissed him goodby. He had a vision of walnut hair in clouds, dazzling grey eyes. He heard again in fancy a voice that purred.

He breathed a low whistle and wiped his brow.

"That was close," he said, all by himself in the runaway cruiser.



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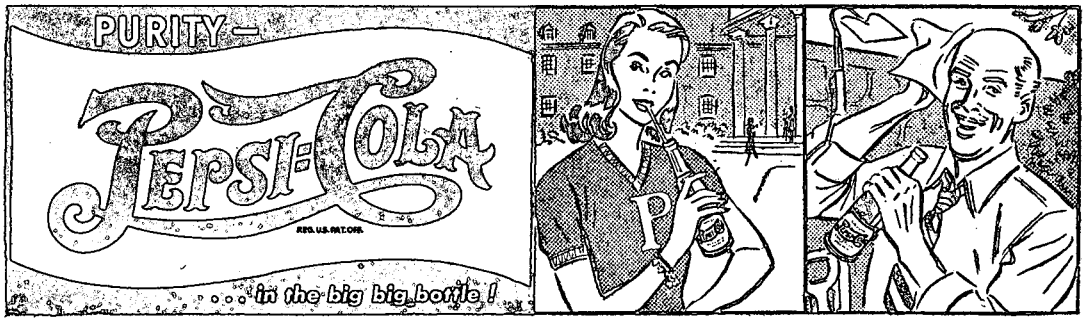

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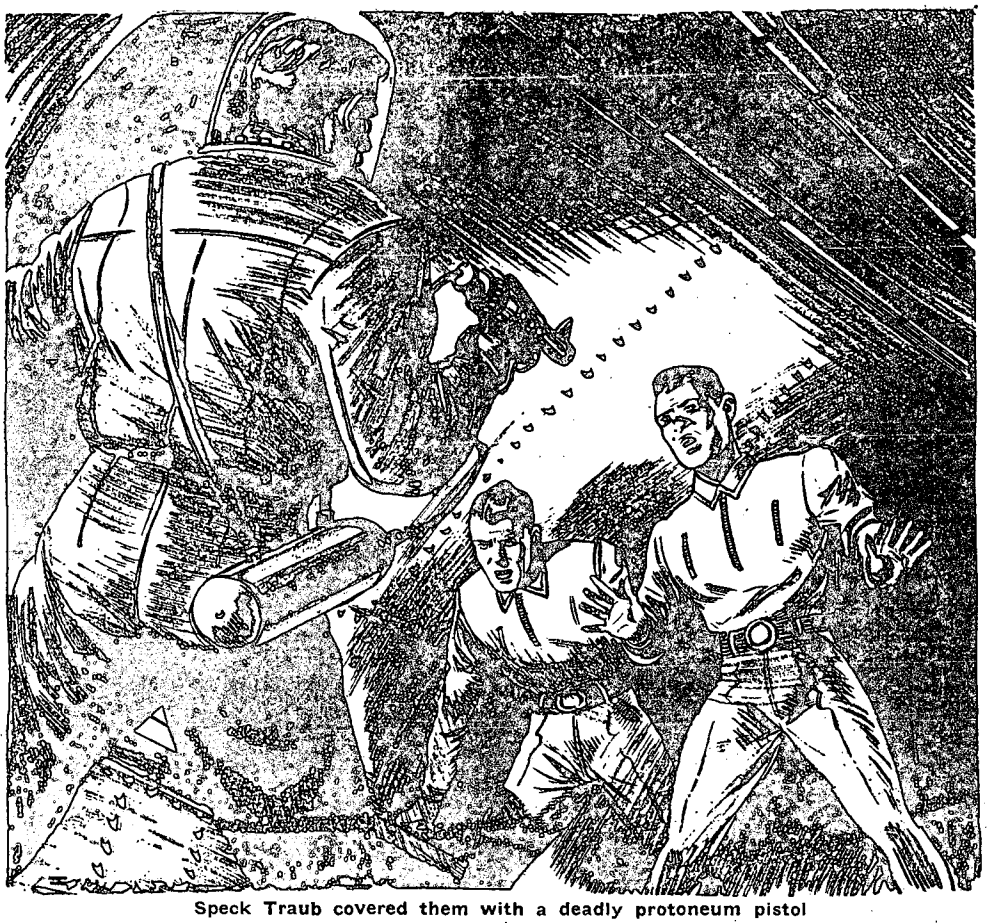

Speck Traub covered them with a deadly protoneum pistol

THE GLORY OF U.S.L.

By N. J. WESTWOOD

With Pirates and Avenging Martians Hot on Their Trail, Three Adventurers Blast Off on a Good-Will Tour of the Universe!

THE inseparable Cardigan and Mace were locked in Cardigan's luxurious office, deep in a research problem dealing with the laws of probability. Dude Cardigan, six feet of lean sartorial splendor, was the honey-tongued press agent for Universal Space Lines. His chunky, leather-skinned fellow-student, Harper "Screwtube" Mace, was chief pilot of the same U. S. L. The present study was one that had been going on intermittently for years.

Dude Cardigan climbed to his feet, brushed the knees of his Martian hakwool trousers.

"Your dice," he grunted. "Shoot the twelve bucks."

"Like heck I will," Screwtube Mace cried indignantly. "That twelve bucks has gotta feed me until I can find an *honest* game somewhere and recover.

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You know, it's gol-darn funny that I can win at Martian craps everywhere else in the Solar System. But half an hour with you, and I go home cleaned, wearing a ring jet for a skirt because you got my pants."

He stared venomously at the three octahedrons of hand-carved Martian gillhorn, nestling in his palm. Cardigan drew himself up stiffly, a hurt look on his face.

"Why, Harper, do you think I would cheat—"

"You're gol-darn right you would," Mace said flatly. "The only reason I been financing this holdup is I thought I could figure out how you did it. Nobody's supposed to be able to load gillhorn dice, but somehow you got 'em fixed so—"

The visiphone suddenly *pinged* softly. Before either Cardigan or Mace could move to snatch up the money and dice, the bulldog face of Erasmus Groat, U. S. L. president, cleared on the screen. Cold eyes swept the scene from beneath elevated bushy eyebrows.

"Well, well! Important conference, eh? If you busy executives can possibly tear yourselves away for a few moments, I want to see you in my office."

The screen went blank. Cardigan and Mace stared at each other.

"Come on," Mace said at last with gloomy relish. "Let's get it over with. I'm not surprised. Ever since I started hanging around with you, I've had nothing but trouble."

They shuffled out through the stenographic department, between its rows of whirring mechatypers, and down the Sacred Corridor.

GROAT, leering at them through a cloud of Venusian *cigreen* smoke, sat behind his huge desk like a bloated spider waiting to pounce.

"Come right in, boys," he greeted with an ominous sweetness that made them shiver. "Be seated. Don't look so distressed over your—ah—interrupted conference. The fault is entirely mine for not supplying your boundless energies with sufficient constructive outlets. You, Mace, expected thrilling trips into space when you signed up as U. S. L.'s chief pilot.

"Instead, you've done nothing more exciting than captain a ferry to Lunopolis and the Moon City mines. You, Cardigan, have been expected to promote U. S. L. without ever taking a trip into space. Those conditions will be changed at—"

"Oh, no," Cardigan broke in hastily, suppressing a shudder. "I'm strictly an Earthman, Chief. I can promote your flame-tails just as well without ever riding in one. Better, in fact, because I don't lose the—er—groundling's touch. Besides, I have a clause in my insurance policy that prohibits my going beyond Earth's stratosphere."

"You also," Erasmus Groat said gently, "have a clause in your contract with U. S. L., agreeing to occupy any office designated by your superiors."

He smiled sardonically.

"Since I'm planning to have your present office redecorated, I am moving you at once to the officers' quarters of our newest ship, which we have christened *Miss Terra.* You are, of course, expected to report to that office every working day, no matter where it might be at the time. I need not remind you that a breach of contract on your part makes you liable to a fine not exceeding seventy-five per cent of your earnings since the date of that contract."

Cardigan subsided with a groan. Erasmus Groat swung a glinting gaze toward Screwtube Mace, who was trying to make himself small enough to hide behind the chair cushion.

"*Mister* Mace," murmured Groat sweetly, "you have been chosen for a signal honor, a tribute to your loyalty and sterling worth."

"I don't deserve it," Screwtube burst out desperately.

"You're too modest. Incidentally, do you remember the shocking incident that broke up the Earth-Mars Interplanetary Celebration last month, when someone put powdered itch weed in the Martian ambassador's space-suit? I just received word that the Martian council has voted the death penalty to the guilty party, if caught. They're sending an investigating committee here to question me

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on my knowledge of the matter. Do I make myself clear, Mister Mace?"

"It's blackmail!" Screwtube shouted hoarsely.

"Why, so it is, isn't it?" Groat beamed. "Now that we understand one another, gentlemen, let's get down to business. We all know that Universal Space Lines is anything but a universal space line. We operate a highly profitable freight-and-ferry service to the Moon and we maintain some traffic with Mars.

"Beyond that, except for occasional charter flights and irregular contact with the colonists on the asteroids and the Venusian Highlands, we have done nothing to advance space travel to the farther planets. This unfortunate condition, gentlemen, is about to be changed. That is where you come in."

"That," Dude Cardigan muttered, "is where I go out."

"BY means of contacts," Groat continued relentlessly, "I have learned that the Government is about to subsidize a space line for the purpose of opening up and developing the rich resources of the Solar System. U. S. L. is determined to be that line. We have the ships and equipment and a chart of a proposed route circumastrogating the entire System. We lack only spaceports at strategic locations. Given those ports, with fuel and supply caches, beam stations, repair shops and depots, we can start service at once.

"You gentlemen are leaving in three days, taking *Miss Terra* on a tour of the System. Your job will be to locate suitable fields at each designated location and arrange with the local inhabitants for free and unhindered use of the fields. Lease the space as economically as possible, and by all means gain the good will of the inhabitants."

"Hey!" Screwtube Mace cried wildly. "We can fly around and locate fields, but how're we gonna get some of those screwy life-forms to sign leases? Look at the copper toads that rule the Big Desert on Mars, or the upside-down telepathic plants on Deimos. A lot of poor guys got eaten up, gaining the good will of those toads."

"But they gained it," Groat reminded. "Besides, this is not to be a punitive expedition. I have a marvelous idea, gentlemen." He ignored their involuntary flinching. "Eighty years ago, when crude airplanes were being introduced to the public, it was customary to send out sky carnivals or flying circuses to gain good will by offering entertainment. We'll do the same.

"Cardigan is a master of showmanship and mass psychology. He will be in charge of the U. S. L. Carnival of Space. I'm having *Miss Terra* fitted for movies, radio and recorded music, vido-vision, ice cream manufacture and simple electrical magic demonstrations. The ship itself is being braced for stunting, at which I—er—understand Mace is a master."

He paused, grinning wolfishly. Cardigan looked at Mace. Mace looked at Cardigan. They both knew something more was coming. Erasmus Groat's eyes held the gleam of a forthcoming master stroke.

They were not disappointed.

"Also, gentlemen, U. S. L. has been particularly fortunate in securing the services of the Solar System's most glamorous figure—Astra Blake."

Cardigan and Mace sprang erect at the sound of the name.

"That dizzy blonde?" gasped Cardigan. "She was kicked out of Vega Spacelines and blame near lost her license twice."

"Miss Blake," Groat said primly, "was simply too clever to suit her associates. They resented having a beautiful girl outshine them in daring and ability. Miss Blake will travel as your co-pilot, Mace. She will also aid the Carnival by demonstrations of her newly developed individual rocket belt, which enables her to fly through atmosphere or space, clad in her armored suit."

"Wait!" Screwtube cried desperately. "She—she's got to take orders from me, hasn't she, Chief? I mean, you aren't going to let her try to boss—"

"Miss Blake will cooperate with you and Cardigan in every possible manner. In an expedition of this kind, into the unknown reaches of space,

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any head is better than either of yours. Particularly, Miss Blake's."

"You mean," Mace wailed, "she can do what she gol-darn likes on this trip, whether I—"

Cardigan was thinking desperately. He knew Astra Blake all too well, having once been her press agent for two months until no longer able to stand her superior airs, he had run out on his contract. The beautiful Blake was, he understood, still seeking him with murder in her eye.

"Chief," he stated reasoningly, "you can't send that defenseless girl out into space with us men. Think of her reputation."

Erasmus Groat waved a negligent hand.

"Oh, that's quite all right, Cardigan. Miss Blake's mother is going along as chaperon."

FOR four days after *Miss Terra's* blast-off from Earth, everything was peaceful and serene. It couldn't very well be otherwise. Cardigan was confined to his bunk, too horribly space-sick to move or talk. The wary Screwtube Mace had prudently barricaded himself in the control room.

Astra Blake, thwarted of vengeance on Cardigan and a chance to tell Mace how to run his ship, was reduced to prowling the corridors and dazzling the five-man crew below. Her sharp-voiced parent, conducted on board by Groat, had vanished into her cabin and remained there.

Perhaps Screwtube's thoughtfulness in decorating her cabin with Martian *Zhuk* had something to do with it. *Zhuk* is known, in various parts of the Solar System, as sniffle weed, sneeze wort or hay fever plant.

But the peace was too perfect to last. On the fifth day, Cardigan recovered enough to totter from his cabin. And on that same day, *Miss Terra* developed a lovely screwtube.

A screwtube is spaceman's slang for a rear thrust rocket tube that has worked itself out of alignment, through improper setting in the shops or a batch of faulty rocket fuel. When a screwtube occurs, the hurtling ship manifests a bewildering tendency to wag its tail in a dizzying corkscrew spiral. The only way to correct it is to shut down all jets, coast until the tubes cool, then send a man into the stern assembly to adjust the delicate micrometer jacks supporting each cylinder.

Space law demands that the commander himself personally supervise such repairs. Groaning, Mace reluctantly dragged himself to the corridor from which manholes gave access to the assembly. The lovely Astra Blake was waiting for him there.

"A fine astrogator you are!" she blazed. "I just looked into your precious control room and saw what caused the screwtube. You didn't bother to check throttle settings before the blast-off. As a result, you've been driving with one piston of the multiple throttle bank a sixteenth of an inch too far advanced. Naturally that tube got too much fuel and was kicked out of line by unequal pressure. If you expect us to entrust our lives to such slipshod astrogation—"

Mace snatched a micro-wrench from Jackson, his chief engineer, and dived headlong into the assembly housing. Being called down by a girl in front of the grinning crew was bad enough, but knowing she was right irked him worse. He *had* been too upset to check throttles and this was the result. Well, she'd never again catch him in a lapse. . . .

The corridor was blessedly empty when Mace cautiously poked his head out, an hour later, with the job completed. He started a wary course to the control room, recoiled sharply from a green-faced ghost that popped from a storeroom doorway.

"Is she gone?" Cardigan whispered shakily. "I been in here an hour, waiting for her to go away."

"Yeah," Mace said gloomily, peering around. "She's gone. What'd you ever do to get her on your neck so hard? She sure don't like you, Dude." His lip lifted in a polite snarl. "How could anybody not like you?"

CARDIGAN shuddered. "I was her press agent for two months, until I accidentally let slip to some reporters that her real name was Jane Shragg. Then I took one look at her

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face and jumped my contract." He closed his eyes and clasped his middle. "I feel awful."

"Sure you do. The first attack of space-sickness always knocks you kicking. But you'll feel swell inside of a week."

"You bet I will," Cardigan said with feeble violence. "By that time I'll be back on solid ground. I was tricked into this trip and only the thought of getting off kept me alive. When we hit Lunopolis, I'm deserting."

"You'll have a fat chance," Screwtube said bitterly. "The old man 'vised us this morning from the freighter *Vestis*, bound for Lunopolis. He says he's going there on business, but I know gol-darn well it's just to spoil our plan to sneak in there for one good spree before we jump off. Now we don't dare stop off. You're stuck in this flying nut-house for a year, Dude, so you better get used to it. Let's go shoot us a game or two. I still can't figure out how you make those dice behave."

Cardigan was so absorbed in his new woe that he was three steps inside the control room before he realized that his feet were carrying him straight toward Astra Blake. She had been sitting on the padded chart locker, studying the vido-vised news reports.

At Cardigan's entrance, she leaped to her feet with a tight smile of anticipation on her lovely lips. She was a tall, slim, utterly beautiful blonde in a form-fitting cream-colored uniform, with her cascade of golden curls tucked up under a trim patrol cap. It was easy to see why she was called the glamor girl of the System.

Mace halted, dazzled in spite of himself. Cardigan shivered, tried to retreat. He managed a feeble "N-gah" before his vocal chords succumbed to shock. Astra Blake took one menacing forward step, then abruptly threw back her gorgeous head and burst into peals of laughter.

"What's so funny?" Cardigan demanded indignantly.

"You! Oh, if your girl friends could see the debonair Dude now. You look like the remains of last year's space wreck." She planted slim fists on slim hips and studied him disappointedly. "Relax, you double-crossing heel. We'd better declare a truce and unite against a common enemy. I'll get even with you later."

She nodded toward the dangling news tape. Cardigan let out his breath and snatched the report. He read it with Screwtube hanging over his shoulder.

Space pirates strike again. Notorious "Speck" Traub captures U. S. L. freighter VESTIS eight hours out of Lunopolis. U. S. L. President Groat held for million-dollar ransom. Space patrol seeking pirate hideout, believed somewhere in Haemus mountains. All ships warned to keep sharp lookout on Lunar run.

"Well, Commander," Astra snapped finally, "either say something or close your mouth. I know how Traub operates and it isn't pleasant. He likes to strike four or five times, fast, and then vanish before the Space Patrol can creak into action. We're only nine hours out from the Moon right now. You'd better unlimber bow and stern guns and break out plenty of ammunition."

"Guns?" Screwtube wheezed wildly. "All we've got are six little protoneum pistols I smuggled aboard. Old Irascible Groat was afraid we'd antagonize the inhabitants somewhere if we went armed."

"Six little pistols!" Astra Blake collapsed limply on the locker, her face pale under its golden space-tan. "Then if you know any good prayers, Admiral, unlimber them."

DUDE pawed the air in a burst of inspiration.

"The Old Man!" he cried. "This is perfect. If we can rescue him from the pirates, his cast-iron heart would soften enough to let us out of this crazy suicide expedition."

"Swell," Astra said scathingly. "Just 'vise Traub and ask him his present address, so we can hurry over and take a million dollars away from him. But be sure to tell him to lock up all his guns because we're unarmed. Got any more Cardigan brainstorms?"

"Very funny," Cardigan snorted. "We could go cruise around the Haemus Mountains until something breaks and then claim we were on the verge of crashing in and risking our lives to save our beloved boss."

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"Listen, dope," Screwtube advised, "that old goat could pay the ransom out of petty cash and never feel it. As far as I'm concerned, I hope they chain him in a rocket-feed gang for ninety-nine years of hard labor."

"Did it ever occur to you master minds," Astra put in with honeyed venom, "that we're only a few hours out from Lunopolis and practically throwing ourselves into Traub's waiting arms? He's on the hunt for new ships like this that he can convert for his fleet. The smartest thing we can do is swing wide and head for Dark-side as fast as we can."

"I hate to admit it," Screwtube sighed, "but she's right. One side while I give this tub a new course and a kick in the stern rockets."

Four hours later, Screwtube joined the still sulky Cardigan at the vision port, to watch the terminator line on the enormous pocked crescent of the Moon slide past. Faint starshine made the alien landscape of Dark-side vaguely visible. Terrific extremes of temperature had cracked and weathered the higher peaks, but in deep valleys the eternal cold and darkness preserved every contour. Occasional soft glints showed the presence of vast ice-fields in the depths of massive craters where the sunlight never reached.

"What does anybody want a landing field down there for?" Cardigan growled. "Lunopolis is only a few hours away."

"On account of this side is turned toward the route of incoming liners part of the time. U. S. L. wants a beam station and emergency field. A guy named Kramm charted a big walled plain a couple of years ago as the ideal spot for a repair shop and cradle house for liners. We got to find this plain, test the ground and report its usability before we blast off for Mars."

"No carnival?" asked Cardigan hopefully.

"No carnival, unless you want to give a special show for the ice-feeders."

"The ice-*whaters?*"

"Ice-feeders," Screwtube explained patiently. "As far as anybody knows, they're the only form of life in these deep craters. Some nutty kind of armored mole that lives underground and burrows up to eat ice patches. There used to be atmosphere on the Moon, I guess, and some of it still lies around, frozen. The ice-feeders don't breathe oxygen, but they get some from the frozen air and water for their metabolism. They can smell ice for miles.

"This guy Kramm, who explored these craters, had quite an experience with 'em. When he landed, there were icicles on his rocket tubes from vapor condensation. Before he knew it, a flock of ice-feeders came popping out of the ground and darn near capsized his ship. They're harmless, except that they're about the size of a cow and strong enough to knock over anything to get at fresh ice."

Cardigan shuddered, watching the weird landscape crawl by. Suddenly Screwtube pointed ahead.

"There she is."

BEYOND a jagged ridge stretched an immense circular walled plain, a good two hundred miles across. It was even bigger than Maurolycus on the Earth side and offered superb landing facilities. There were even regular breaks in the surrounding rim range where ships, unable to fly in, could "stilt-walk" to base on emergency repulsor beams.

"Perfect," Screwtube announced after a half-hour's circling of the vast saucer. "Now, I'll drop in and have a look at that pit in the center. If it's deep enough, they can simply roof it over for a depot and cradle house. Grab a space-rig, Dude, and we'll go for a walk."

"Nuts to that we stuff," Cardigan snapped. "I'm not going out and freeze my— Hey, I saw something move out there!"

Screwtube snapped off the last rocket motor switch and sprang to Cardigan's side. The ship was resting on flat lava, a hundred feet from the black blob of the central cup. Mace squinted at the darkness around them.

"You're seeing things. There's nothing out there but shadows that have been frozen down for a million years. Come on out and back me up. Blake's

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gone after her suit and I don't want to go out there alone with her and, listen . . ."

His words choked off. A faint *clang* had echoed through the ship, followed by a sharp hiss, then a louder *clang*.

"The airlock!" Mace strangled. "Somebody's outside, trying to get in!"

"Not trying, monkey-puss," boomed a voice from the control room door. "We're in. Get away from that control panel and keep your hands in sight, both of you."

Cardigan and Mace goggled at the massive, space-suited figure filling the doorway. He was a giant with an ugly leathery face that seemed to be freckled with tiny glittering diamonds. "Speck" Traub had once been a seleneon miner in Tycho Crater. His nickname came from the characteristic absorption of metal fragments, resulting from atomic blasting in the pits.

Speck Traub stood motionless, covering them with a deadly protoneum pistol while his piggy eyes swept the room. Behind him, other figures crowded into sight. Cardigan counted five pirates, four of the most brutal-looking Earthmen he had ever seen and one rat-faced Martian. All carried ready guns. One still held the dis-torch with which they had cut their way into the ship.

"Spread out, you scum," Traub snarled at his pack. "Cover the ship and blast anybody who wiggles a finger." He turned back, glowering at Screwtube Mace. "All right, wise guy, out with it! What's the idea of blasting in here like you owned the place? How'd you find my hideout?"

"No!" Screwtube choked. "Honest, we didn't know you or anyone else was on Dark-side. We were sent out to chart this plain as an emergency field for liners. We blasted off from Earth last—"

"Jet down!" Traub cut in impatiently. "I don't need your life history. I'll find out quick enough if you're lying. Get into space-rigs. Make it snappy! You're marching to our shack and there ain't no air conditioning on the way."

A few moments later they were herded out onto the frozen plain, along with *Miss Terra's* crew. Traub himself brought up the rear, dragging a furiously struggling Astra Blake.

Cardigan caught a glimpse of her lovely face in the beam of a port light and for a moment something stabbed at his heart. His fists clenched tight and his muscles tensed with a blind, furious urge to smash the leering Speck Traub.

HE relaxed, shaking his head inside the helmet.

"You're getting soft, Cardigan," he muttered. "If you want to feel sorry for anybody, feel sorry for Speck Traub. Sure she's the most beautiful girl in the Solar System. But—"

His monologue suddenly broke off and his eyes widened. He squinted around at the bulky, space-suited figures. The pirates were all accounted for, except one who had been detailed to stay behind and move *Miss Terra* to some hiding place. He could see Screwtube and Astra, but not a sign of the sharp-voiced senior Blake, Astra's mother. Suddenly he grinned lopsidedly and a shrewd glitter came into his eyes.

Despite his heated suit, the chill bit into Cardigan like a knife. Unused to gravity only a sixth that of Earth, he obeyed the marching order with an incautious step that nearly sent him somersaulting skyward. Only a quick snatch by Screwtube Mace rescued him from becoming a clay pigeon for the pirate's guns.

Shuffling forward, the group dipped down into the inky blackness of the central pit. A torch beam lanced out, showing the path and the pirate's hideout ahead.

Cardigan gasped in amazement. Crouched on the floor of the pit was a huge prefabricated metal space depot, probably looted from some freighter. Two ships, Traub's swift fighter and the captured *Vestis*, lay close by. As Cardigan stared, *Miss Terra* slid down on her stilt-beams and was cradled beside the others. There, in the eternal blackness of the pit, a whole fleet could hide forever from the Space Patrol.

Cardigan's heart sank. It sank still further when he saw the grim tubes

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of atomite cannon projecting from the outer shell of the depot, making it virtually an invasion-proof, escape-proof fortress. It appeared that his desire to locate the pirates was bearing unwelcome fruit.

Gun muzzles prodded the captives through airlocks and into a scene of dazzling splendor. The big depot was a riot of rich tapestries, costly rugs and luxurious furnishings, looted from a score of liners, freighters and yachts. Music, pictures and news poured from an elaborate vido-visor, while gravity plates and air plants made the place seem as though it were on Earth.

"Stop gaping and shed those rigs!" Traub's voice bellowed through Cardigan's trance. "Jemson, Croff, lock these lugs in with the old goat. Tomorrow they can go to work on the rocket-feed to replace that bunch the Space Pats blew up in our last fight. I'll show the lady to her suite myself."

Cardigan suddenly stopped in the act of stepping from the shell of his space-suit. His face was grimly pale, but his blue eyes showed no side of fear.

"You're a sap, Traub," he said quietly.

"What?" the giant roared, swinging up his pistol. "Why, you puny— What do you mean, I'm a sap? Speak up!"

"Sure," Cardigan repeated, a malicious grin twisting his lips. "If you had any sense, you'd chase her out to the kitchen to cook up a real meal for your outfit. Or didn't you know Astra Blake was a prize cook?"

"Dude Cardigan, you doublecrossing rat!" Astra cried furiously, struggling to break Traub's grip. "You know I never cooked anything in my life. Why, I wouldn't be caught dead in a kitchen!"

"Don't mind her," Cardigan said negligently. "She just wants to be coaxed. Get her to make some of her special chocolate ice cream for you."

SPECK TRAUB licked his lips and his crew began to inch forward, a hungry glitter in their eyes.

"Did you say ice cream?"

"Sure. She's so crazy about making it that she had a special fifty-gallon freezer installed in the ship."

"I'll claw your eyes out!" Astra raved.

"Jet down!" Traub snarled, shaking her. "You're heading for the kitchen, baby, and you'd better do a good job. We ain't tasted ice cream in almost a year, so it better be good." He glowered at Cardigan. "Jupiter help you, slug, if this is a gag. Lock 'em up. Coax her, huh? I'll show her some real coaxing."

Cardigan's grin broadened as they were hustled down a corridor and shoved into a dark, barred room. The rest of *Miss Terra's* crew was locked in another cell.

Screwtube Mace eyed his partner reproachfully.

"You oughta be ashamed, Dude, getting even with Astra at a time like this. You'll probably get us all murdered."

Behind them something rustled cautiously in the darkness and a quavery voice whispered:

"Who—who is it? Are you prisoners, too?"

"Chief!" Mace shouted. He dragged the figure into a shaft of light from the barred door. "Are you all right?"

"You!" Erasmus Groat exploded. "How did you get here?"

"We accidentally— Ugh!" Screwtube subsided abruptly, massaged his ankle where Cardigan had kicked him. "What's the big idea?"

"Hello, Chief," Cardigan took over smoothly. "Surprised to see us here, eh? Well, we heard about your capture and figured that this was the most logical hideout for the pirates. Of course, we couldn't storm the place, not having any guns, so we had to figure out a ruse to get in and rescue you. Just relax and we'll have you clear in no time. That is, if you play ball with us."

"What do you mean, play ball?" Groat demanded warily.

"Sending us on this crazy expedition was nothing but spite and stupidity on your part, and you know it. We can get you out of here without a cent of ransom, providing you promise to call off this dizzy trip and let us go back to Earth. Is it a deal?"

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"Why, you — you — " Groat sputtered. "That's blackmail!"

"Well, so it is, isn't it? I'm glad we understand each other."

Erasmus Groat swore in helpless rage.

"All right. But if this is one of your gags, Cardigan—"

Screwtube Mace, scowling violently, took Cardigan aside.

"Your idea's swell, but your logic's sure cockeyed," he whispered. "In case you've forgotten, we're inside a barred cell, behind a locked door, unarmed. There are nine or ten killers between us and our suits, to say nothing of guards on the airlock."

"Don't give it a thought," Cardigan advised. "Just relax and plan the celebration we'll have back on Earth next week."

"Space-addled! I might have known when you pulled that dirty trick on Astra!"

A commotion outside cut the argument off. Heavy, furious steps clumped toward their cell and Traub's hoarse bellow lifted in rage.

"You with the slick tongue and the pasty complexion, come out here and say your prayers! I'm going to knock you loopy and then shove you outside in your underwear. So that dizzy blonde's a prize cook, is she?"

"See?" Screwtube shivered. "Now you've done it. Say something nice to pacify him. Apologize."

CARDIGAN chuckled. "So you couldn't handle her, eh, Traub? Oh, well, if you must have ice cream, my partner and I can make it for you, if you aren't afraid to let us out."

"Afraid?" Traub roared. "Get out here and start making it. Nine of the best shots in the System are just aching to blow you apart if you're bluffing, rocket-mouth."

The barred door swung open. The two marched out, ignoring Erasmus Groat's pleas to include him. Cardigan took one look at Traub and fought down an urge to shout with laughter. The burly pirate was a wreck. One eye was blackening, a lump bulged his forehead and rows of ugly scratches crisscrossed his cheeks. Astra Blake's slender hands were evidently more than ornamental.

"What about this ice cream?" Traub growled.

"The freezer's built into our ship," Cardigan explained. "Send us in there —under guard, of course—and we'll turn it out faster than you can eat it. I'll make it and bring it in. My partner can dish it up."

Traub suspected trickery, but the thought of ice cream to men cut off from Earth's delicacies overrode caution.

Cardigan was sent back to *Miss Terra* with two hard-eyed pirates, armed to the teeth. Whistling with more confidence than he felt, Cardigan broke out the concentrated pills and dried milk and went to work. In ten minutes the guards were holding alert pistols in one hand and furiously shoveling in chocolate ice cream with the other.

Heaping up a huge bowl, Cardigan set the freezer for another batch, slid into his suit and started back to the hideout. He was greeted with roars of enthusiasm. Ignoring Screwtube's reproachful glare, he deposited his load and immediately rushed back for more.

At the end of four trips, the pirates were becoming sated with the feast, yet nothing had happened. Cardigan's optimism began to wear thin. Worried lines creased his forehead.

The fifth trip, he waited until the depot airlock slid open, then deliberately tripped over the sill. He fell sprawling, chocolate ice cream flying in every direction, smearing the floor of the airlock and the frozen ground outside. The guards cursed and drove him back to the ship for more. Still nothing happened.

"That's enough," Traub growled at last. "Ice cream is coming out of my ears. Lock 'em up again and we'll have another feed before they start pitching fuel tomorrow."

Guards shuffled forward to hustle Cardigan and Mace back to their prison. Cardigan turned defeatedly, froze.

Without warning, the floor under his feet buckled and twisted. The whole depot lurched violently, with a sharp *hiss* of escaping air.

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Traub and his crew stood paralyzed. Like a flash Cardigan whirled, seized the last bowl of ice cream and hurled it to the floor. Instantly, the whole floor seemed to spurt up into a mound and then burst apart.

Hurled from his feet, Cardigan caught a glimpse of a massive black-scaled head, like the forepart of a small whale, come wallowing through the twisted floor-plates. A long, cupped tongue slid out to lick eagerly at the spilled ice cream.

"Ice-feeders!" Traub bellowed above the din. "They're wrecking the shack! That dirty skunk brought 'em by spilling ice cream. Blast 'em down!"

A PIRATE whipped up a gun at Cardigan's helpless, prone figure. It lashed flame that crackled six inches over Cardigan's head. A second monster had reared up, throwing the pirate off-balance. Other guns were blasting wildly as a horde of scaled heads ripped the sturdy depot apart in their anxiety to scrape up every drop of the spilled ice cream.

A pirate went down, dropping his gun. Cardigan snatched it. Protoneum blasted his cheek. He shot blindly, seeing his would-be assassin go down in a gory welter. He was suddenly aware of difficulty in breathing and a sharp, biting chill.

"The space-suits!" he bellowed. "Screwtube, get a gun and blast the cell doors! Get everybody into suits before the air all leaks out."

His shout concentrated the pirates' fire on his scanty shelter behind a crystoplast table. Without warning, the lights flickered and went out. Protoneum blasts ripped at the thick blackness. An ice-feeder squawled in agony. Cardigan held his fire until he heard the *clang* of cell doors opening, then began to dart along the wall, firing at every flash. He stumbled over a panicky ice-feeder and fell into a rack of space-suits.

It took but a moment to get into one and snap down the helmet. By then others were surging around him in the darkness, clawing at the suits. Whether they were friend or enemy, he could not tell. The firing had practically stopped.

Suddenly a voice whispered in his helmet phone.

"Dude, follow me. Screwtube has Groat and our crew out and equipped with suits and guns. I've got a light. When we're all together, I'll snap it on and we'll blast Traub's outfit to pieces."

He felt himself drawn aside into a knot of space-rigged figures. Abruptly a light beam shot out, revealing the space-suited figures of Traub and four pirates, slipping stealthily toward them across the mangled floor. The ice-feeders had vanished. So had the ice cream.

The light sent Traub and his crew scrambling for the cover of darkness. Protoneum blasted and one of the pirates fell. The shifting light circle caught the last of them vanishing through the ruined airlock.

"Quick!" Astra Blake's voice called. "They're making for their ship. If they get off, they'll shoot us to bits with their cannon. Dude, help me man one of their defense guns in the outer wall."

Cardigan lumbered after her into the confines of a gun turret. Through the vision port he could faintly see shadows stumbling toward the slim bulk of Traub's space ship. The deadly cannon was all Greek to Cardigan, but apparently Astra knew how to handle it, for her gauntleted hands moved swiftly over dials and levers.

"Hurry!" she whispered. "Push that switch there beside you."

Cardigan obeyed. The gun quivered and lashed out with a stream of crackling fury. For a moment he saw the stumbling figures outlined in its glare, pinned to the side of the pirate ship by the fury of unleashed atomite. Then figures and ship vanished in an incredible burst of flame.

DUDE CARDIGAN sagged weakly against the wall.

"Got 'em," he said shakily. "Wiped out the pirates and rescued the Old Man, instead of being knocked off ourselves. Now the trip is off and I can go back to Earth!"

Astra Blake had been gazing at Cardigan, a strange, soft light in her eyes. At his burst of enthusiasm, she winced

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and a shadow crossed her face. Then her eyes narrowed and her lovely lips tightened grimly.

"Your idea of using ice cream to lure ice-feeders was simply wonderful, Dude," she told him softly.

"Yeah?" Something in the softness of her voice made Cardigan vaguely uneasy. "As soon as Screwtube told me about the ice-feeders, I started figuring how they might be put to some commercial use. Then when we got into the pirate's shack, it was easy to see how they might be used to help us break out. Simply a matter of using my head, that's all. You did all right, too, Astra."

"Of course, I did," she said sweetly. "You don't think you shot down five pirates, do you? I snatched a gun and got three of them from the doorway during the excitement. An ice-feeder trampled one and you shot another. . . . Wait a minute! There's something moving. One of the pirates got away." She whirled, blocked Dude's vision as she adjusted the gun. "Fire!"

Blindly Cardigan shoved the lever, heard the same lashing thunder of unleashed fury. In the silence that followed, figures crowded into the gun turret behind them.

"Dude, I'm sorry I misjudged you," Screwtube Mace said huskily. "That was marvelous."

"It certainly was," Erasmus Groat's voice seconded. "I apologize for not appreciating you, Cardigan."

"Then the expedition is off, Chief? We can give up this idiotic chase?"

"I promised," Groat said. "And I always keep my promises. . . . Hey!"

Somehow Astra Blake had got clear of the vision port and the scene outside stood faintly revealed by the starshine. Where the pirate ship had stood, there was nothing but a gaping hole in the frozen ground. There was, amazingly, a second gaping hole where the U. S. L. freighter *Vestis* had stood.

"Cardigan!" Groat howled, clawing at his helmet in an effort to tear his hair. "You imbecile! You crackbrained, double-tongued moron! My new freighter! You renegade ape, don't you know that new freighter and its cargo will cost more than the ransom you saved me? So you want me to call off your trip, do you? Well, get over there and 'vise a Space Patrol cruiser to come here and pick me up. Then I'm giving you just one hour to blast off for Mars. Don't let me see you again inside of two years!"

THE terrible light began to dawn on Cardigan. He saw with awful clarity the doublecross Astra Blake had handed him. Her face was invisible in the darkness, but he knew she was smiling contentedly. She had promised to even scores.

"Chief," he strangled, "you can't do that. It was Astra Blake who told me to fire that second blind shot. Besides, she's been doublecrossing you the whole time. Ask her where her mother is. Where's the old gal you put on board to chaperon this trip? I'll tell you, Chief. There isn't any mother on board! That was Astra herself you put aboard, made up like an old lady."

"I know that!" Groat shouted furiously. "It was my idea in the first place. Astra Blake can take care of herself. She's got more brains than a dozen of you. We worked that fake mother trick so you couldn't raise a row to squirm out of going. Now get out of my sight before I forget myself."

"Never mind, Dude," Astra put in sweetly. "We'll have simply grand times together on the trip. I'll even cook you some of my prize-winning meals. You must try some of my arsenic soup sometime, doublecrosser!"

The Second Space-Exploit of Dude Cardigan, Harper Mace and Astra Blake in

MINNIE OF MARS

A Rollicking Story Coming in the Next Issue!

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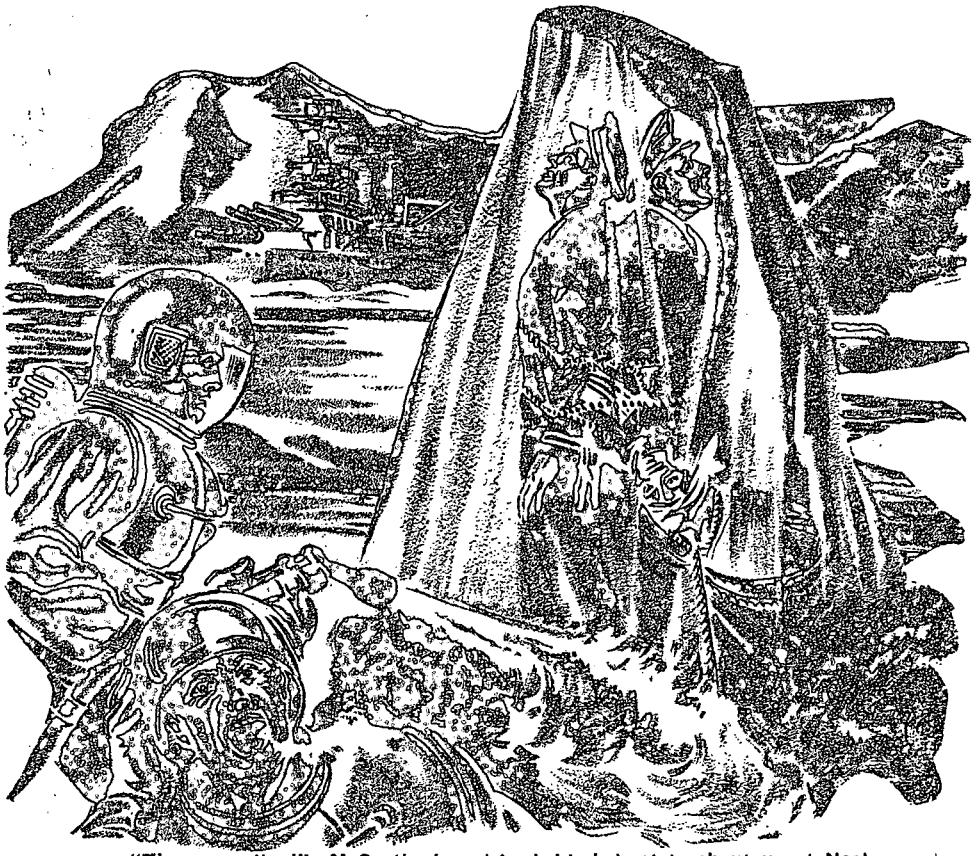

"They are alive!" McGrath shoved back his helmet to shout up at Neal

BRITISH THERMAL UNITS

By OWEN FOX JEROME

Deep in the Vastness of the South Pacific, an Evil Genius Heralds the Approach of a New Ice Age!

COMMANDER Richard Neal stood on the bridge of the North American cruiser *Delano,* a pair of electrifocal binoculars clamped to his eyes as he studied the empty horizon off the port bow. Up in the crow's nest a lookout and a signalman were keeping the same intent watch.

The heavy cruiser was plowing along at full speed, her forced draft laying a horizontal funnel of black clouds of smoke in her wake. In the radio-television room, the communications officer was frantically trying to get in touch with the operator aboard the dreadnought *Alaska.*

There was no response. To all intents and purposes, the *Delano* was the only moving thing within a thousand miles of trackless ocean. Yet, by rights, the *Alaska* should have been less than three hundred miles away from her companion ship—and the *Delano* had already covered nearly four hundred miles. The last position the *Alaska* had given was 20° north and 130° west, roughly halfway be-

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tween the coast of Mexico and the Hawaiian Islands.

Seven hours before, right in the middle of a two-way televised radio communication, the visiscreen aboard the *Delano* went blank. The steady voice of Lieutenant Samuel Neal, aboard the *Alaska*, faltered for an instant, tried to go on, and then broke off with a cry:

"Help! Dick! It's gone out of control—" he had shouted. Then the audio stage went silent.

Just like that. And for seven hours the *Delano* had plowed in a southwesterly direction at full speed, in search of the pride of the North American Pacific Fleet. "Dick" was Commander Richard Neal, elder brother of Lieutenant Samuel Neal. For seven hours he had stood watch on the bridge, taking nothing but black coffee, straining his eyes through the highly magnifying electric binoculars for the missing and strangely silent *Alaska*.

A lieutenant approached Commander Neal from the chartroom and saluted.

"Pardon, sir," he said, "but we have just crossed latitude fifteen at one hundred twenty-nine degrees."

"Change course west along fifteen to one-thirty," Neal ordered without taking the binoculars from his face. "Then steam north to twenty. They've simply got to be in this area."

"Yes, sir. Won't you lie down and rest for a while, Commander?"

"No!" Neal almost shouted hoarsely. Then, in a milder voice: "Sorry, McGrath. Give the new course, and then come back. I've got to talk to somebody!"

"Yes, sir. I understand."

The whole fleet understood. The affection the two Neal brothers held for each other was a fine thing. The Neal tradition in the American Navy was almost a saga, had been since the consolidation of the Americas back in the twenty-first century. There'd been a hundred years of fighting Neals in the service.

"That crazy scientist!" Commander Neal snorted when Lieutenant McGrath returned to the forebridge. "Weather control! A flowering Earth! Brought about by artificial manipulation of temperatures!

"I had a feeling that Professor Gadsby had blown the stuffing out of a head valve, but he sold the governmental authorities at Central City on his cockeyed scheme to change the ocean currents by creating artificial barriers.

"Control fog and rain and clouds and temperature—above all, he prated about removing the B.T.U.s from everything! I tell you, McGrath, the man is insane!"

"But, Commander, a change of the Japanese Current and of the Gulf Stream *would* affect the weather," Lieutenant McGrath reminded him.

"Yes, but how? Gadsby couldn't show proof with his machine how he could make the desert bloom, change the hot tropics to temperate zones, temper the severity of the Arctic and Antarctic cold so as to triple and quadruple the arable surface of Earth. How actually to control the weather in other words."

"Didn't the British navigators laugh at an American named Ben Franklin, back in the eighteenth century, when he charted the Gulf Stream and put forth his theory on how it tempered the coast of England and affected Atlantic navigation?" asked McGrath. "And didn't they finally have to concede he was right?"

COMMANDER NEAL looked at his junior officer sharply.

"That's true," he admitted. "But this is the year twenty-one eighty. Science has made mighty strides since then, but we still haven't conquered the vastness of the elements. As small as the world has shrunk, wind and water and spatial gyrations have proved too great for man to handle.

"Besides, Franklin didn't invent a vest-pocket ice machine by which he claimed he could drastically change the face of Earth. He merely studied, observed and advanced the results of his observation of things as they were."

"But we saw Professor Gadsby do that experiment with the rat," the lieutenant insisted. "Or do you think that was a trick?"

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NEAL nodded slowly, thinking back to what they had seen via the televisor screen less than eight hours previous.

"No, Lieutenant," he admitted gravely, his face haggard with worry, "that was no trick. Gadsby actually did that. Right before our eyes, while my brother Sam explained it on the audio, the professor demonstrated to the officers of the *Alaska* what he could do with British thermal units."

Both men fell silent as they remembered. Gathered around a table before the *Alaska's* telescreen so the demonstration could be seen on the *Delano,* three hundred miles away, Admiral Greer and several of his staff had watched the professor exhibit his power over units of heat, while the officers of the *Delano* had stared into their own visiscreen.

Of Gadsby's machine itself, nobody knew a great deal. It was a boxlike contrivance which resembled an old-fashioned sweat cabinet. Its two sides and top were literally covered with dials, gauges, switches and rheostats. The interior of the machine was a mass of tubes, magnets and coils.

The source of power was the generating system of the battleship *Alaska* itself—enough power to operate and maintain completely a city of a hundred thousand inhabitants. That part of the demonstration was realistic—and terrific.

From the front panel of the huge cabinet, a cone-shaped funnel on a flexible neck extended out like an anesthetist's ether cone of the twentieth century. A sailor had captured a huge, whiskered rat in the cook's galley, and the rodent was madly running around in his cage on the table.

Professor Amos Gadsby, a lean man with cadaverous face, stooped shoulders, piercing black eyes and the nimblest of spatulate fingers, explained the process briefly as he adjusted the cone to focus on the caged rat. Then he took his position at the side of his cabinet to manipulate the controls.

Lieutenant Samuel Neal relayed the substance of Gadsby's speech and described his actions for the benefit of those watchers and listeners on the *Delano,* three hundred miles away. There was no doubt that Professor Gadsby had something big, else he would never have interested the American government sufficiently to set him and his paraphernalia aboard the finest battleship of the Pacific Fleet. The *Delano* had been detailed as a sort of tender, and together the two warships had been dispatched to a barren atoll in the South Pacific for Gadsby's experimental work.

"Professor Gadsby," Lieutenant Neal went on, "has just described the principles of heat units and the phenomena of cold. Cold, as almost everyone knows, is not an active, positive condition. It is the normal state of the universe, the absence of heat units—which are, so to speak, the real artificial condition.

"The professor likens heat, which is so necessary to life, as almost a feverish and abnormal condition in scattered parts of the universe. But to continue with his experiment, gentlemen. By focusing his cone upon the rat you see on the table, Professor Gadsby intends to project a zone of force which will instantly remove all B.T.U.s within the ray, producing the absolute cold of Outer Space—two hundred and seventy-three degrees below zero. Watch closely."

Admiral Greer and his officers bent closer to the table. Even the sailor who had brought in the rat stood on tiptoe and craned his neck. The watchers aboard the *Delano* heard Lieutenant Neal's voice as he asked one observer to move to the side, so the telescreen view would not be obscured.

As the man's blue-coated back slid from television range, the watchers aboard the *Delano* saw the palest of pale rays spring into life at the mouth of the cone, to focus down on the rat cage. It was more like the ghost of a ray, a visible, imponderable force, rather than a beam of light. And instantly the frantic rat halted in mid-motion!

Without the slightest quiver he stopped dead. Then before the eyes of the watchers, the rodent swiftly turned white. Inwardly from the tips of his whiskers and tail, he bleached white, as though some invisible

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painter were spraying him with lime. The wires of the cage turned white and quickly swelled and thickened.

"Into a marble statue in a trice!" came Lieutenant Neal's awed voice over the audio unit. "Notice the bars on the cage. They are coating with frozen air—like moisture condenses and freezes on the coils of an electric refrigerator. It is unbelievable!"

THE professor cut off his ray, and there was a single, distinct clap of sound—like an electric discharge of lightning. Everybody in the *Alaska's* radio room jumped. Then Professor Gadsby started his fingers flying over his dials and switches.

Admiral Greer reached forward and poked gingerly at the frozen creature within the cage with a pencil. The rat toppled over, breaking off several of his whiskers short. The naval officers gasped with surprise.

"Professor Gadsby claims that he can set up his machine on the atoll," Lieutenant Neal resumed, great excitement in his voice. "Powered by the generators of the *Alaska,* a barrier of ice can be built up—"

It was at this instant that the telescreen went blank. Lieutenant Neal faltered and tried to go on.

"—a barrier of ice that will deflect ocean currents at will! By judicious use of this invention, in greater or lesser degree in different parts of the world— Help! Dick! It's gone out of control—"

And that was all. Silence. And seven fruitless hours had elapsed.

The two officers on the bridge of the *Delano* stirred and shivered, as though they had been smitten by a cold wind. They had. An icy draft of air hit the bridge of the *Delano* without warning. Which was absurd here in the subtropics.

"Commander!" exclaimed McGrath. "Look at the sea ahead of us!"

Neal stared. And he cried out in amazement. Instead of the warm azure depths of the Pacific, as he knew it should be in this latitude, he saw the gray-green iciness of the North Sea. These were Arctic waters! Even the westering sun was distant and cold-looking. A haze was in the air.

Neal clapped the binoculars to his eyes. Off in the distance he saw a long, low line of something that was black and undulating like a snake. The glasses quickly brought the object into focus.

"Life rafts from the *Alaska!*" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Towed by the captain's gig and loaded with shivering men. Two points to starboard, McGrath. Quick!"

"Aye, sir!" responded the lieutenant, signaling the wheelhouse.

Fifteen minutes later, rapidly losing headway, the cruiser *Delano* picked up the entire crew of the battleship *Alaska.* That is, all but three. With his decks crowded by the addition of a thousand men, Commander Neal listened to the amazing story of the officer in charge.

"Never such a catastrophe in the history of the Navy!" Commander Remington's teeth chattered between stiff jolts of warming brandy. "I never heard of an entire crew having to abandon a battleship before, with never a shot fired. But I'm afraid a number of men will die of exposure, at that."

"For heaven's sake, man!" cried Neal. "What happened? Where is Admiral Greer? Where is—my brother?"

"It was Admiral Greer who called the order to abandon ship. Something went wrong with that Gadsby experiment and we couldn't shut off the power."

"Why not?" Neal demanded bitterly.

"The power lines were fused, and we couldn't get below to the engine rooms. The engine-room gang barely got out with their lives—just ahead of a terrific blast of cold that came out of nowhere. When we tried to get back to stop the generators, the bulkheads were sealed with solid sheets of ice!"

"Incredible!" exclaimed Neal, but in his heart he knew it was so. For he had seen a miracle happen over the television screen. "Where is Professor Gadsby?"

"Trapped!" cried Commander Remington. "Trapped in the communications room — a l o n g with Admiral

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Greer and Lieutenant Neal. We couldn't get them out. With men collapsing from the horrible cold and exposure, I was lucky to get the crew safely away. It's inexplicable, Neal. I can't understand it. It all happened so quickly.

"We got away from the ship within an hour, thinking to escape the awful cold. We've been steering east for nearly seven hours—but the cold is spreading out and following us. What shall we do?"

"Stow your men as much out of the way as possible. We'll steam right on in to find the *Alaska,*" Neal declared. "You wouldn't flee from an enemy, would you? Well, this may be as much an enemy as any Asiatic fleet. I must—"

LIEUTENANT McGrath came swiftly into the commander's quarters.

"Will you come to the main deck, sir?" he asked in a queer voice. His face was white to the lips. "I—we've just sighted something—a small iceberg or floe. I—oh, God, Commander, it's an ice pinnacle with three men frozen *inside* it!"

Without a word Commander Neal raced for the main deck. McGrath followed closely at his heels. Commander Remington of the *Alaska* lay in the bunk and shivered.

The *Delano* was moving forward now through a sea of slush ice that was as smooth and leaden as glass. Occasional floes were drifting by, some of them bumping and grinding along the sides of the trim cruiser. And the air was bitter cold. It was fantastic. The ship was driving westward now, and a lowering yellow sun was setting in an orange sky beyond a craggy headland which had no business to be there at all.

Clapping his glasses to his eyes again, Commander Neal studied the black obstruction between him and the sun. The electrifocal glasses cleared up the mystery quickly.

"Good Lord!" he gasped to McGrath. "That's a gigantic iceberg!"

Then he brought his glasses to bear on the strange ice pinnacle pointed out by the lieutenant. It was just as McGrath had said. Only now, Neal could distinguish faces.

Back to back, roped together erect, stood the bodies of Admiral Greer and Lieutenant Samuel Neal. Apparently kneeling beside them was a bound and gagged sailor. And all around the trio glittered and sparkled the sheen of crystal. The three men were totally encased in a needle of transparent blue ice.

"McGrath!" Commander Neal's voice choked up. "Get the landing stage ready. We're going alongside. Tell Youmans to break out the flame-throwing equipment. Maybe we'd better have a couple of insulated diving suits. We've got to—to cut them out of that ice!"

Again the *Delano* lost way as arrangements were made to snare the weird funeral floe. McGrath returned hurriedly to salute his superior office.

"With your permission, sir," the lieutenant said, "I will be one of the men to man the flame torches. It'll have to be done carefully, or we'll incinerate the bodies."

"Thank you, McGrath," Neal replied anxiously. "But hurry! We've got to work fast. We're not conditioned for an Arctic cruise."

Slowly the *Delano* drifted closer to the immense berg in the distance, the snared pinnacle of ice grappled close meanwhile to the ship's landing stage. Attired in helmeted suits, McGrath and a sailor were swiftly attacking the crystal prison.

Commander Neal, his face bleak and pinched by the horrible cold, stood there at the rail and looked from the work below to the slowly approaching iceberg. By the very minute the air grew colder. More and more ice was forming. Even the huge black mass seemed to be swelling.

And then through the rays of the setting sun, Neal made another horrible discovery. He stared with utter disbelief. The hazy, gray outlines of the battleship *Alaska* showed through the sides of the incredible iceberg! With the sun behind it, Neal could make out the outlines of the ship clearly—every turret, every gun, both masts of the superstructure. The *Alaska* was entombed in ice!

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A yell from below startled him. McGrath had shoved back his glassite-fronted helmet to shout up at him.

"They are alive!" McGrath exclaimed. "The sailor's eyes are blinking at us!"

Then he turned back to his work. In no time the ice pinnacle gave up its prisoners.

WILLING hands carried the released men up the ladder to the main deck. All three were almost exhausted. But oddly enough, until Neal stopped to remember the insulating quality of ice and snow, they seemed in better shape than the *Alaska's* rescued crew.

Swiftly they were taken to the sick bay and treated with restoratives, liquor and heating pads. It was the sailor, Tom Darrow, who was able to speak first. The youngest, he had the most vitality.

"Gadsby went mad," he whispered hoarsely. "When his machine seemed to go out of control, he was doing it on purpose! We didn't know it until after the crew left the ship. Then, before we three could attack him, he turned that cone-shaped gadget on us and paralyzed us. He tied us up and lugged us out to the main deck near the port landing stage. He told us he was taking over the *Alaska* as his private base—that he was going to freeze the whole world and dominate it!

"Then he froze a shell of ice around us and toppled us into the water. But something must have gone wrong, after all. Ice began to form all over the ship. I saw it as we drifted away. It's still forming. Gadsby must be dead by now—frozen stiff. But the ice still grows."

"And will," added Lieutenant Samuel Neal, his voice weak. "Until the power plant stops. Gadsby's taking all the thermal heat units out of everything. I can't understand how—if his source of power has gone dead."

"It hasn't," said Commander Richard Neal gravely. "Have you forgotten that the *Alaska* was equipped with special cyclotrons to generate atomic energy for Gadsby's experiments? If his machine is drawing power from that source, the infernal process may go on until the whole Earth is gripped solid in a shroud of ice!"

"What's to be done—if anything?" asked Lieutenant McGrath hopelessly. "We may be trapped by now ourselves."

"Just one thing," Commander Neal declared grimly. "Admiral Greer, have I your authority to destroy the *Alaska?*"

The admiral was too spent to reply. He merely nodded his head.

"Battle stations!" Neal said to McGrath. "We're going to blow the *Alaska* and that iceberg of British thermal units out of the water!"

Within five minutes the *Delano* was reeling and shuddering to the recoil of twelve-inch guns. In spite of the terrible cold, it was murderous pointblank range and the shells couldn't miss. Ten minutes of broadside action and the main powder magazine of the *Alaska* let go, shattering the artificial iceberg asunder.

There was a terrible blast whose back-sweep almost rolled the *Delano* over on her side.

And then a current of hot air washed over the cruiser like a warm breath of delayed spring.

The sun and the *Alaska* sank beneath the sea together.

Ice remained, having yet to melt. But the Gadsby experiment was over, the danger was past. And through the hand of nature, heat again returned to the precincts from which it had so ruthlessly been driven.

Coming Next Issue: SATELLITE OF PERIL, Featuring John Carstairs, the Botanical Detective, by Frank Belknap Long

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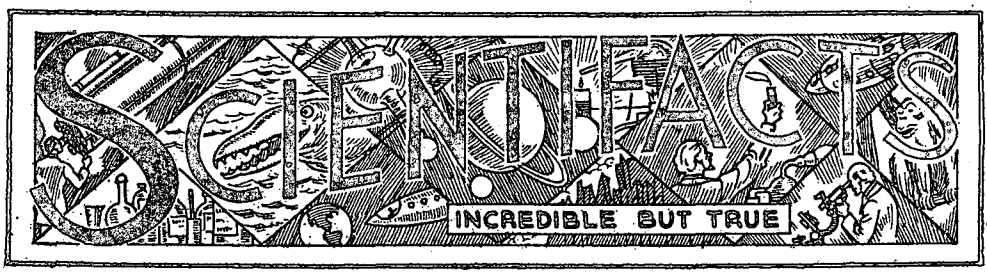


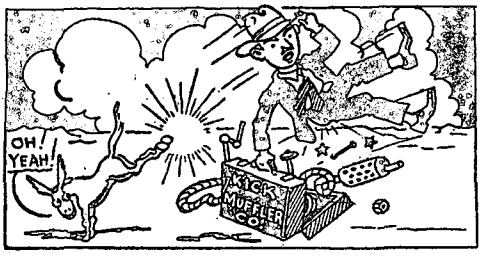
WHO CAN'T MATCH COLORS?

BECAUSE the human eye is incapable of accurately distinguishing or measuring hues and shades and tints of color, it is next to impossible for painters and decorators to match a previously mixed batch of paint, for dyers to match perfectly a previously dyed batch of cloths, and so on.

However, the General Electric Company has come to the aid of color experts with the invention of the photo-electric spectrophotometer. This is an amazing machine of speed and precision which enables its operator to determine with exactitude the percentage of color to any object placed before the eyepiece. It has the terrific range of more than two million shades and colors.

KICK MUFFLER

FOR many years has the principle of the Maxim Silencer been employed to muffle the exhaust noises of guns and motors. And now science has come forward with a new kind of



muzzle muffler. Similar, at a casual glance, to the sound silencer and mounted in the same position on a gun or machine-gun, the Renick recoil control reduces the firing "kick" of a gun barrel to a mere tremor.

Soundless and kickless—it is just a couple of steps to the ray gun of the future.

STEREOSCOPIC FINDERS

A NEW instrument recently delivered to the Ordnance Department by the Eastman Kodak Company is the stereoscopic height finder, a long, cannon-barrel sort of apparatus which is set horizontally and requires four men to operate it.

It quickly determines the height of enemy planes, indicates the correct gun elevation and the setting of the shell fuse for the burst at the proper spot in the air.

With this contrivance the efficiency of anti-aircraft batteries will be greatly increased. There is one such instrument on the Island of Corregidor already in service defending Manila.

THE BLACK DEATH—ALIVE

IN THE fourteenth century Europe was decimated by bubonic plague which claimed approximately twenty-five million victims. The very cause of the disease was unknown. Today the cause and prevention both are understood, but bubonic plague has not yet been wiped out.

Incubated by rats and carried, directly or indirectly, to mankind by fleas, it is a curse of the Orient more deadly than the Japs. The last big Asiatic epidemic ravaged the East and Near-East between 1898 and 1923, claiming eleven million victims in India alone.

Brought to the western shores of the United States by rats aboard ships from the Orient, the infected animals spread the blood-sucking fleas to na-

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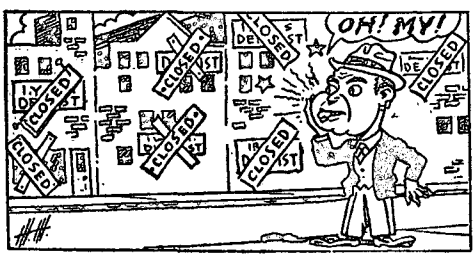
five rats in 1900, from which rodents the infection had been passed on to ground squirrels, chipmunks, marmots, prairie dogs, and so forth.

The infiltration of the deadly disease in native wild rodents is known to have penetrated as far east as Montana, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico. Since 1935 the U. S. Public Health Service has been waging ruthless war on the carriers of the deadly plague. The black death is not dead —it is sleeping.

NO DENTISTS WANTED

TO ADD to all the many unusual things which can be said for Texas comes now the scientific report that the Texas Panhandle contains certains elements of climate, water,



milk and soil products as to not only render native inhabitants immune to tooth decay but to improve the dental health of incoming migrants.

According to Dr. Edward Taylor, Texas Health Department, the condition prevalent in Deaf Smith County is due to the large per cent of fluorine, calcium, phosphorus and vitamin D in soil and water, and therefore in all food products.

A research is being made to establish the elements responsible for this caries phenomenon, upon the conclusion of which it is hoped a formula can be prepared to make possible this dental decay immunity universal.

THE EXPLODING SUN

ACCORDING to the theory of physicists, in our present state of knowledge, the sun has an excellent chance of exploding and almost instantly turning its family of planets into gas—in about twelve billion years.

The present, and tenable, theory regarding the terrific heat of the sun—about 34,000,000 degrees Fahrenheit—is that it is caused by the conversion, by atomic bombardment, of carbon atoms into nitrogen atoms and nitrogen atoms into carbon atoms. The missiles are hydrogen atoms, and the by-product is helium. But the average life cycle of an atom of carbon in the sun is about two and one-half million years, that of a nitrogen atom about fifty million years.

Thus, so slow is this complete cycle made—of a carbon atom into a nitrogen atom and back again to a carbon atom—that less than one one-hundredth of one per cent of the carbon atoms in the sun have re-started this cycle since the days of ancient Egypt.

SOMEBODY'S LOCO

THE ingenius gadgets of science fiction are not nearly so incredible as they sometimes seem, nor are they always highly original. Concentrated food for the space rovers today has its counterpart in vitamin pellets. Atomic disintegration has a sound foundation in the disintegration of radium into lead.

Automatic or mechanical aids to make life easy have not been confined to the hat-tipping device patented in the nineteenth century. In 1834 a self-lighting cigar, with a match composition at the end, was invented by John Marck of New York.

It worked. It was called the loco-foto cigar in imitation of the word locomotive, which by the uneducated was supposed to be self-moving.

BONE TRANSFUSION

THE speeding up of human blood transfusion from direct connection of donor to donee, to blood banks, to concentrated blood plasma, has received another impetus. Dr. L. M. Tocantins and Dr. J. F. O'Neill, of the department of Hemology and Surgery at Jefferson Medical College of Philadelphia, have developed the tech-

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nique of giving transfusions directly through the marrow of the bone.

They have found that this method proves much faster than others, in many cases the fluid being absorbed into the general circulatory system as fast as it is injected.

CELESTIAL BARRAGE

AMONG the thousands of meteors which shower upon the earth every year of its mad journey around the sun, the scientific study of a 500-ton meteor which fell near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, June 24, 1938, has revealed that its explosive energy was sufficient to have struck with the force of 10,000 tons of TNT.

Computing its speed to have been more than eight miles per second, had it not been for the long angle of its fall and the fraction of the atmosphere which partially disintegrated it, this one bomb from the skies would have completely destroyed the city.

And this was a baby meteor compared to the one which struck in Siberia early in the twentieth century, and the one which buried itself in the Arizona desert in prehistoric times.

CONCRETE FEVER

BECAUSE of the terrific amount of heat liberated in the setting and curing of a steel and concrete monster as huge as the Grand Coulee dam on the Columbia River in the State of Washington, it was necessary to install miles of pipes as the work progressed through which to run the cold waters of Columbia River to hold down the temperature.

Left to itself, the huge mass of concrete would have taken a hundred years to cool down, cracking badly all the while. By the use of temperature

checks and the circulatory system of cold water, engineers estimated that ninety-five years of the heat aging was peeled from the dam at a cost of about $1,400,000.

High fever, but the worth of the savings cannot be calculated in dollars and cents.

The projects of the dam itself and its potentialities are so great that all comparisons break down. For instance, if all the other concrete dams in the United States were lumped together—and that would be no small lump—the Grand Coulee dam would still be the larger of the two.

The largest pumps ever built will impound part of the river's water in the prehistoric Coulee gorge to form the largest man-made lake in the world, which in turn will irrigate more than a million acres of arid land. The water rushing through the turbines of the eighteen huge generators will supply nearly three million horsepower of energy.

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DAMES IS POISON

A Pete Manx Story

By
KELVIN KENT

A Time-Traveler Introduces Bathtub Gin to the Borgias —and Brews a Merry Medieval Mix-up!

PETE MANX was unhappy. Usually when he strolled down 52nd Street he was at his best, with tailored plumage that a peacock might have envied. Peacocks' tastes run to the garish, anyhow, and certainly Pete's oyster-gray derby, maroon shirt, and egg-yolk tie were far from drably conventional. Mr. Manx, as he himself often remarked, made his own fashions.

At present his style was cramped. At his side, clasping the Manx forefinger with a moist and grubby hand, was a small child—Joe Manx, Pete's nephew. A feeling of mild loathing existed between the two. Now, however, due to a series of unforeseen circumstances, Pete had the unwanted job of minding his nephew for the afternoon. He had not had the nerve to refuse his sister-in-law.

"I lead with my chin," he groaned silently, glancing sidewise at the flat, freckled face of Nephew Joe. "I was figgerin' on a game of snooker this P. M.—but not with Young Filthy in tow. Quit that!" he added morosely, as Joe attempted to kick a passing child not much younger than himself.

Just then Betsi came along. Betsi was Pete's current heart-beat, an usherette and a honey. Her blue eyes examined the two Manxes, first with surprise, then with anger.

"Why Betsi," Pete said. "Hel*lo!*"

"Hello yourself," she returned.

Pete's sturdy arms clamped around Nesserdin's body.

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"Telling me you ain't married, you big four-flusher. Ha!"

"Not my kid," Pete explained. "I'm just minding him."

"Not your kid—with that mug? Ha!" Betsi repeated, and vanished indignantly into the stream of traffic before Manx could arouse himself.

He stared after Betsi, failed to discover her, and glanced anxiously at the repulsive face of his nephew. To reassure himself, he found a mirror in a shop window.

"Okay," he muttered, somewhat relieved. "I may be no Robert Taylor, but there's a limit."

"I wanta go to Coney Island," said Joe.

Pete said no. Too many people knew him at Coney, where he had once operated a concession. Even in downtown New York, he might run into more friends. And the presence of the nephew was distressing to Pete, who prided himself of being a man-about-town. But where could he hide out? Obviously a billiard parlor was out.

Maybe—maybe—

Pete hailed a taxi and, regardless of expense, gave an uptown address. Doc Mayhem was the guy. A screwy old duck, but it was as good a hideout as any.

THE scientist proved to be preoccupied. His small, scrawny figure was jerking excitedly as he ushered Pete and Joe into a living-room, where he promptly forgot them to resume an impassioned argument with a bulky, red-faced man who squatted pontifically in a chair.

"Hiya, Professor Aker," said Pete mildly, and was ignored.

"Strychnine!" the professor bellowed, bringing down a hamlike fist on his knee. "Ouch!"

"Snake venom!" Mayhem retorted with equal energy.

"At it again, eh?" Pete observed. He wandered over to a side table and examined curiously an oddly shaped ring upon it. It looked old. Also, it had a crest Pete didn't recognize emblazoned upon it. He pressed a tiny catch on the signet, and the crest popped up. From the hollow revealed a tiny, gummy black pellet rolled out onto the table.

JUST then Joe leaned too far out the window and had to be retrieved. Pete sat the child in a corner, relaxed himself, mopped his brow, and turned to watch the scientists. He always liked a good fight.

"Strychnine!" Professor Aker roared again. "It's common knowledge that the Borgias favored it! The alkaloids—"

"You're as old-fashioned as Galileo," Mayhem snapped. "My personal researches show that snake venom was used by both Cesare and Lucretia Borgia."

"Why don't you analyze the stuff and find out?" Aker sneered. "If I were a betting man, I'd trim you for plenty."

"Somebody been bumped off?" Pete asked mildly. "What's it all about?"

"A friend of mine sent me a Borgia ring he dug up in Italy," Mayhem explained impatiently. "It has poison in it—*hey!*"

"Huh?" Pete followed the doctor's horrified stare, and his own jaw dropped. Young Joe, hungry as always, had just popped the poison pill into his mouth. His Adam's apple jerked convulsively.

"Don't swallow that!" Mayhem yelped, diving forward.

"Yeah, lay off," Pete added. "It might make you sick."

"Might make him sick!" Professor Aker mumbled. "Great heavens! That ring belonged to Lucretia Borgia!"

Pete looked blank. "You mean it's hot?"

"I mean it's poison! We haven't analyzed it yet, so we don't know what type of poison it was."

Mayhem thrust the kicking Joe at Professor Aker. "Phone the emergency! Get a stomach pump! Mustard—soapy water—anything!"

Pete caught on suddenly. "You mean the pest's swallowed poison?" He gulped. "Doc, we gotta do something. Anything!"

Mayhem's face was chalky. "If we only knew what type of poison that

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was . . . I've plenty of antidotes in the surgery, but if I use the wrong one. . . ."

"Strychnine!" Aker roared feebly.

"Snake—*whup!* Pete!" Mayhem clutched Pete by the sleeve and dragged the astounded man into the next room. "Take care of the boy, Aker," he shouted over his shoulder. "Emergency measures! I'll be right back!"

PETE, expostulating, found himself in Mayhem's familiar laboratory. Wires, rheostats, vacuum tubes, and gadgets were strewn about in a confused mass. There was a switchboard, and a metal chair that was all too familiar to Mr. Manx.

"Doc," he protested, as he was forced into the chair. "This ain't no time to go time-traveling." Briefly he wondered whether the eccentric scientist had a last gone off his rocker.

Mayhem was making hasty adjustments. "It's the only way, Pete, if we want to save the boy's life. There isn't a minute to waste. We've got to find out what poison was in that ring."

"But—"

"Quiet!" the doctor roared, slamming down switches. "Just listen! That ring belonged to Lucretia Borgia! Undoubtedly she put the poison in it."

"I don't know the dame."

"She lived hundreds of years ago, in Italy. I'm sending you back there, Pete, so you can find out what kind of poison was in the ring. When I bring you back here, you can tell me, and I'll know what antidote to use."

"But it may take weeks!" Manx expostulated.

"It may take weeks in Renaissance Italy," Mayhem said, "but I'll bring you back to this time-sector in exactly one minute. It's a new improvement I've just added to the machine. It's now two-twenty-five. Take as long as you like in Italy—it doesn't matter, because you'll come back here at exactly two twenty-six. See?"

"No," Pete said.

"Find out what that poison was," the scientist snapped, and pulled a switch.

Briefly the world spun and jolted around Pete. He opened his eyes to find himself prostrate under a fish-stall. More than one sense apprised him of this fact.

Dazedly he crawled out, muttering, and stared around. The time machine had worked again, jerking Pete's consciousness back through the centuries to inhabit the body of someone who lived late in the 15th century. He found himself in a bazaar, an open-air market.

"Looks like Hollywood," Pete mumbled, feeling homesick. A hot Italian sun blazed down from a cloudless sky. All around him people, clad in unusual costumes, were haggling and buying and selling. Manx glanced down at himself.

The body he was inhabiting was clad in nondescript medieval garments, and there was a sword in its scabbard buckled to his side. Unfortunately the stones in the hilt were imitations. Oh, well.

Pete scowled, remembering his mission. He'd have to hurry. . . . No, he wouldn't. It really didn't matter how much time he spent in Renaissance Italy. Only one minute would elapse in 1941—plenty of time to give young Joe the antidote. Providing, of course, that Pete found out the nature of the Borgia poison.

He accosted a passing stranger, a well-dressed man with a face like a ferret and a neatly trimmed black beard.

"Hey, pal. Just a minute."

The stranger whirled, one hand going to his rapier-hilt, his teeth bared in a snarl. "By the Saints!" The startled look faded from the keen eyes, but wariness remained. The lean, brown hand did not leave the rapier. "Who are you?"

"Uh—Petro Mancos," said Pete, using the first alias that came to his mind. "But that don't matter. I'm a stranger here. All I want is a little information."

"Pah!" The bearded man made an impatient gesture. "Orsino has no time to waste on such as you."

"Just tell me where I am!" Pete pleaded. "I'm looking for a party

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named Borgia. And I've got a hunch I won't find any telephone directories here."

The other stared. "Borgia! *Sangre!* What is your business with that house? And which Borgia do you mean?"

"Lucretia," Pete said.

There was a flashing smile. "Oho! Then I, Orsino, shall help you! By your looks, you're an outland mercenary soldier. Come with me to this wine-shop and we'll talk."

Over red Oporto, they talked. Pete felt distrustful of Orsino, yet he was apparently in luck. For the black-bearded man was willing to help him.

"Lucretia Borgia never sees anyone without special recommendations. Yet I serve her and can get you an audience."

"Swell!"

"Only," Orsino paused and tapped his nose. "Only you must do a slight favor for me first. Cesare Borgia is staying here in Milan for a time, and I am supposed to deliver a gift to him. I cannot as I must leave for Genoa today. If you will undertake this errand, I shall arrange for you to see Lucretia Borgia."

"Why not?" Pete felt pleased that everything was turning out so well.

"Excellent! Now here is the gift. Be sure it reaches Cesare's hands. And be equally sure that you do not open it yourself!" There was sudden mockery in the black eyes. "Else you may regret it. Cesare gives a banquet tonight, as always. He seeks to increase his popularity by feeding and wining the nobles of Milan. And Cesare is always curious about exotic gifts. A great, stupid bull of a man—" Orsino clamped his lips suddenly, as though he had said too much. "I shall give you explicit directions. Tonight, you must go to his *palazzo*."

IT was simple enough. Pete stowed the flat package under his tunic, thanked Orsino, and set out to kill time till sunset. Milan was an interesting place. He found a few ducats in his purse, earned, presumably, by the original inhabitant of this body. Pete added to them, after learning that the Milanese were familiar with dice games.

The hours passed pleasantly enough in various wine-shops. And there was interesting gossip to be heard—the latest scandal about Henry Tudor, whose bloody horoscope had just been cast by a noted astrologer, Spain's disputed discovery of the sea-route to the Indies, Catherine of Aragon's unpopularity in England, the latest axe-murder and love-nest slaying in Rome. It all semed very familiar to Pete.

He was as adaptable as a chameleon. Moreover, his frequent journeys into the past had taught him the value of keeping his mouth shut when in doubt. He listened and learned. Cesare Borgia was immensely popular in Italy. He reminded Pete a bit of Diamond Jim Brady, with his lavish entertainments, his endowments and philanthropies, and his hearty good-nature. But Lucretia!

"She's a bad lot," one scar-faced swordsman whispered. "And she hates her brother, Cesare, bitterly. Afraid of his popularity. She gives banquets, too, but she uses too much seasoning." His eyelids lowered significantly. "Poison!"

"Yeah?" Pete gulped wine and set down the goblet with a bang. "What kind?" He looked excited.

But the other shrugged. "She has her secrets. Her hatred of Cesare is even worse since the Arab came."

"What Arab?"

"A great Shaykh of the East. His ship was wrecked, he was captured by pirates. Now he's an honored guest of Cesare. There is some reason, I don't know what, why the Shaykh's friendship is immensely valuable."

"Yeah?" Pete watched lamps being lit. "Well, I gotta make tracks. See you later, pal." He cast a few golden ducats on the table and departed. Presently he was at the *palazzo* of Cesare Borgia.

It was more difficult than he had thought to see his quarry. The guards touched their pikes and swords menacingly. Pete, however, talked fast.

"He'll be glad to see me. I've got a gift for him."

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"Let's see it."

"Sorry, boys. I got my orders."

"You have also a well-filled purse?" suggested one of the soldiers meaningly.

Pete caught on. He distributed ducats, and was ushered into the guard-room and told to wait.

"It may be a while, Messer Mancos," a soldier said, "but you may drink with us, if you like."

Pete lifted a pewter goblet to his lips. "Thanks. Down the hatch, shavetails." He didn't trouble to explain that.

HE waited, and waited. Also, he chafed. The guards were rolling dice on the rough table, and Pete noticed his ducats were passing across the board. Presently he edged into the dice game, with unexpected results. He lost steadily. He discovered at last that the dice were loaded, but he felt it inadvisable to make any accusations. The soldiers looked like tough customers, and their swords were sharp.

However, Pete had his methods. He withdrew to a corner of the table, found three pewter goblets, and arranged them before him, upside down. Under one of the cups he slipped a ducat. A few confusing passes, and the ducat emerged from under an entirely different cup. This was an old gag for Pete. He had often done it before, with walnut shells and a pea.

As he expected, the soldiers were interested. Pete blandly ignored them. He kept on with his little game. At last he paused, scratching his head, and glancing puzzledly from one goblet to another. He put out his hand and hesitated.

"That one," a soldier said helpfully, pointing.

"I think it's *that* one," Pete scowled.

The guard laughed. "You are blind! I saw—"

"If the ducat's under the one you're pointing at, you can have it."

Curiously enough, Pete lost the bet. It was the old come-on—sucker bait. Within a few minutes the soldiers were clustered around Mr. Manx, betting excitedly on the elusive ducat. They won, sometimes, but more often they lost.

A new voice broke into the clamor. "Allah! The man has skill!"

The guards drew back, saluting. Pete looked up to see a scrawny, beak-nosed man in flowing garments and a turban.

"Hi, pop," he said companionably. "Want to sit in?"

"I am Nesserdin," said the newcomer.

"And I'm Petro Mancos." Pete suddenly remembered what his wine-shop companion had told him about the mysterious Arabian guest of Cesare. "You're the Shaykh, huh?"

"I am the Shaykh Nesserdin, yes. I have been watching you. We have jugglers and tricksters in the east, but never have I seen one with your dexterity."

"Thanks." Pete was flattered, and let Nesserdin win three times in succession while the soldiers, awed, stood at attention against the walls. After that, however, the Shaykh's luck changed.

He lost ducat after ducat. But he remained completely fascinated by the puzzle.

"Under this one, I am sure. By the beard of the Prophet! Again I am wrong! Let us try again, Petro Mancos."

"Messer Mancos," said a guard. "You may see the Borgia now."

"Thanks." Pete gathered his winnings and slid them into his purse. "So long, Pop. See you later."

"Stay! You cannot leave now! This time I am sure I will guess aright."

"Later," Pete promised, and followed the guard.

The Shaykh pursued, tugging intently at his beard and muttering excitedly.

Cesare Borgia was dining with his guests in a huge banquet hall. He sat at the head of the board, a gigantic bull-like man with a ruddy, handsome face and sharp, intolerant eyes. All the nobles of Milan were apparently present.

"Ho!" cried Cesare. "So this is the Messer Mancos! Now what is this gift you have brought me?"

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Pete took out the package. "Here it is."

He stared around, realizing that he was hungry. A whole boar, roasted and juicy, lay near him, regarding him with malevolent jeweled eyes. Pete looked away hastily.

A gaunt, bearded man rose and approached Cesare, whispering in the latter's ear. The Borgia's eyes widened.

"So, Messer Machiavelli? Very well."

Machiavelli grinned nastily. "Our men have just found Orsino. It would be best to have him open this gift."

Pete's ears pricked up. "Orsino? Say, that's the guy who gave me the thing."

"So?" Machiavelli purred. He clapped his hands. Within a minute Orsino was dragged into the banquet hall. The guests stopped eating to stare.

Orsino looked as if he'd been given the third degree. His clothing was in rags, and his beard smeared with blood.

"He tried to slip a stiletto into my back," Machiavelli said. "But my guards have sharp eyes. Now, Messer Orsino, open this little gift."

Orsino glared, shaking his head in silence.

"No? Then perhaps you wish to sleep on the rack tonight?"

"Hey, what is this?" Pete demanded, feeling his stomach freeze apprehensively. "Have I got myself mixed up with a racket?"

Nobody paid any attention. Orsino, biting his lips, took the package and unwrapped it. A jeweled box fell out.

"Open it," Machiavelli whispered.

Cesare Borgia watched loweringly. Even to Pete's eyes, it was evident that something was wrong. Orsino had butterfingers. He seemed to be trying to open the box without touching it.

Cursing, Cesare rose, whipping out a sword. "Open that box!" he thundered.

The lid snapped up. Orsino dropped the box and staggered back, blood dripping from his hand. Machiavelli laughed.

"A poisoned needle, as I suspected. A gift from your sister, my prince!"

"Be silent," Cesare said. He looked down at Orsino, who lay kicking his heels against the carpet. "Drag this offal out and throw him into the garbage pit." Anger sprang into the intolerant dark eyes. "Now, Messer Mancos—"

"Hey!" Pete yelped, trying to retreat and finding it useless. "This is a frame-up!"

But Cesare's great sword was lifting, ready to smash down at Manx's head. Pete's clawing hand found the roasted boar. He swung the dripping carcass up as a shield, and the Borgia blade cleaved it in two. Cesare laughed.

"I'll aim better next time," he promised, and moved forward.

"Wait!" It was the Shaykh, suddenly standing before Pete, one arm lifted. "Do not slay him. At least let him explain! He may be innocent!"

"Sure, I'm innocent," Pete babbled. "It was a frame! I've been double-crossed. Just give me a chance."

CESARE lowered his sword doubtfully. "You are my guest, Shaykh Nesserdin. Your wishes shall be respected. Yet what is the life of one such varlet worth?"

"He interests me," the Arab said. "There is—ah—something I wish to learn from him. Let him speak, I pray you."

"Then speak!" Cesare thundered at the culprit.

Pete obeyed, telling as much of his story as he thought would be safe, making it quite clear that he had been an unknown tool in Orsino's hands. Also, he declared fervently that he was too young to die.

"Ha!" said Machiavelli gloatingly. "Let me put him on the rack. Under the *estrapade* or the boot he will talk more loudly."

"Don't do it," Pete argued, thinking fast. He remembered certain words he had heard about Cesare being renowned for his entertainments, and that he was trying very hard to impress the Milanese nobles. He lowered his voice confidentially. "I can

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help you immeasurably, Messer Borgia."

"*Prince!*" corrected Machiavelli.

"Yeah—Prince." Pete glared at Machiavelli. "Just let me talk to you confidentially for a few minutes."

"So you can put a knife in my gullet?"

The thought seemed to amuse Cesare. He took Pete by the scruff of the neck, nodded at his guests, and dragged his victim into an anteroom. There he sat Manx down hard on the floor and glared at him. "Now—talk!"

It wasn't difficult. Cesare, despite his bad temper, was intelligent. Pete mentioned Elsa Maxwell, described her activities, and told the Borgia that he needed an m.c. "Master of ceremonies, see? A sort of combination manager and publicity man to handle the parties you throw. Just food ain't enough to put a shinding over. You need novelty."

"We have jugglers, musicians, dancers."

"It's gotta be something different, Messer—I mean, Prince." Pete went on, talking fast, trying to sell himself as a medieval Elsa Maxwell to the Borgia prince. At last he seemed to have succeeded.

"Very well," Cesare agreed. "I'll let you live and serve me. It is not your fault, I suppose, that Lucretia is jealous of me and uses her poisons so rashly. It is the Arab."

"Nesserdin?"

Cesare jumped. "Listen! You *can* aid me, Mancos. Listen well! The Shaykh Nesserdin is the possessor of an immensely valuable treasure. When he was shipwrecked, he buried that loot on an island in the Mediterranean. But the location of it only he knows."

Pete nodded shrewdly. "So that's the angle! You're trying to get the dope out of the old boy."

The other smiled wolfishly. "Your words are strange, but I think I understand them. Yes, I wish to learn the location of the treasure. But Nesserdin guards his knowledge well. His lot is worth—" and Cesare named a sum.

Pete made a hasty computation and gasped aloud. Nearly a million bucks, American money. *Whew!*

"With that treasure, my fortune is made. My sister Lucretia wishes it for herself, however. She shall not have it," went on Cesare, smiling again. "Nesserdin seems to like you. If you can get him to tell you the location of the treasure, I shall reward you richly. If you fail, it is the rack or the boot."

HE paused significantly.

"What a choice," Pete gulped. "The loot or the boot. But okay, Prince. It's a deal."

"Meantime, you will act as a—what is it?—an m.c., to disarm suspicion. We must not let Nesserdin suspect our real motives."

"Of course not," Manx agreed weakly.

Cesare took a locket from his neck and gave it to Pete. "A sign of my favor. But it will not guard your throat against the sword, remember," he warned. "As for the Arab, I could put him to torture, but men of his race are stubborn, and I think guile will work better. So learn his secret. Meantime, the night is young. Before the banquet is over I shall expect some means of enlivening it."

Pete gulped. "It's short notice." A thought came to him. "Okay. I can fix it up. But I'll need some favors to pass around to the guests."

He explained, and Cesare grunted and summoned Machiavelli. "Open the treasure room, Messer Machiavelli. A ruby for each guest."

"A ruby!" Mr. Manx licked his lips. "Swell!"

Fingering his sword reflectively, Cesare went back to the banquet hall. With Machiavelli, Pete found the jewels. Then went to the kitchen where, by good luck, he discovered a huge sweet pasty ready to be served. He issued hasty orders.

"You got gunpowder in these days? Magnesium?"

Nobody had heard of flashpowder. Pete substituted scrapings of copper and iron. It was better than nothing. Machiavelli watched with a skeptically lifted eyebrow.

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Somebody came down to announce that Cesare was chafing. Pete gave a last touch to the pasty and grinned.

"All set," he announced.

Following the servants to the banquet hall, he wondered uneasily whether he had put too much gunpowder in the pasty.

The dish was set down in the center of the board and Pete, at a nod from Cesare, took over. He clambered atop a bench and yelled for silence. At last he got it. Expectant faces were turned toward him.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he began, feeling more at ease in his familiar role of barker. "We have a little surprise for you this evening—a prize package. The Prince is distributing favors in a different way. You keep what you get!"

He had already lit a fuse that disappeared into the interior of the pasty. There was a sudden bang as the gunpowder exploded.

It was spectacular enough. The rubies, buried in the pasty, flew in every direction. Machiavelli got one just under the eye. He yelled and glared at Pete malevolently.

The contents of the pasty spattered out like a volcanic eruption, punctuated with flaring colors. It was a miniature Vesuvius. But it achieved its novel purpose. The guests discovered the rubies, and the banquet dissolved into dozens of pasty-smeared nobles diving, scuttling, leaping, and racing after the jewels.

The Shaykh Nesserdin tugged at his sleeve. "Show me your trick with the goblets and the ducat," he urged. "I think I have guessed it now."

Cesare was grinning.

"Okay," Pete nodded. "Right this way, Pop. Right this way!"

And that was that. For the present Manx was safe.

AS THE days dragged slowly past, he realized that his position was a precarious one. So far, he had made no progress in discovering the nature of Lucretia Borgia's ring poison. Meantime, Cesare Borgia watched him with an eagle eye and almost hourly demanded reports on his progress with the Shaykh.

There was little to report. Nesserdin, fascinated by the ducat-goblet trick, had formed a firm friendship with Pete, but he deftly turned the subject whenever the treasure was mentioned.

Mr. Manx, practical as always, had an idea. In his previous excursions to the past he had sometimes made money—which did him no good when he returned to his own era. Why couldn't he arrange things differently? Why, for example, couldn't he discover the location of the Arab's treasure, and dig it up when he went back to 1941? Why, it was a cinch!

Each night Cesare threw a party. And each night Pete had to think up something new. His ingenuity was becoming sorely taxed.

He staged a treasure hunt, which was completely successful. He had a bevy of beautiful Milanese girls, discreetly clad in Manx-designed bathing suits, go swimming in a fountain full of amber wine. He fitted out a small amusement area, with a Wheel of Fortune and other concessions—a tank of goldfish, each with a jewel tied to it, for which guests seined with tissue-paper landing-nets; a dart game in which the targets were balloons, each with a jewel inside—and a variety of other games. The prizes were always valuable. And Cesare's reputation was thereby greatly enhanced in Milan.

"They suspect me," he told Pete once in confidence. "Because of Lucretia, you know. They think all the Borgias are poisoners. But now public opinion is swinging to my side. Soon—" He grinned wolfishly.

"Just wait," Pete promised. "I'm planning a swell shindig—a real cocktail party. I've been distilling some liquor. I can't get the real stuff, of course, but this will do. You never tasted a French seventy-five, Prince. Or a Suissesse—or a Stinger. And wait till I've doped out how to make a Zombie!"

Nevertheless, Pete did not fail to make his own plans. He had to find out what poison Lucretia used. He also planned to learn from Nesserdin

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the location of the treasure. After that he knew very well that his life wouldn't be safe in Milan. So he provided a means of escape.

The Arab was helpful. In Nesserdin's private palace, near Cesare's, Pete built the device that would ensure his getaway. Then, one night, disaster struck.

It was the cocktail party that did it. Pete, foresighted as usual, drank a pint of olive oil before attending. He had created half a dozen new and distinctly unusual alcoholic drinks. The occasion was an important one. The greatest nobles of Milan had at last overcome their suspicions sufficiently to attend a Borgia banquet.

"I have lived down my sister's reputation!" Cesare exulted and laughed. "They no longer consider me a poisoner! Soon I will have all the backing I need, including the Arab's treasure, Messer Mancos. Has Nesserdin told you yet?"

"Not yet. Give me time," Pete pleaded.

THE banquet was an unqualified success, up to a certain point. Pete knew that the olive oil in his stomach could absorb large quantities of alcohol. But he had drunk bathtub gin in an era when a scarified palate was a mark of sophistication. So he did not, for some time, realize the horrible effects of his Petro Mancos Special.

It was bad, no question about that. It had a wallop like a sledgehammer. Yet is wasn't the worst. Cesare, whose palate was like iron, poured the Specials down happily. The guests followed his example, but there were many furtive glances exchanged.

Then Pete rose as servants brought and distributed goblets full of brownish fluid. "A new drink, ladies and gentlemen, created especially for this occasion. The Borgia Cocktail! I give you our host, the prince!"

The guests stood, goblets raised. They tossed off the cocktail. There was a ruby at the bottom of each cup —but no one noticed that! The Manx-distorted liquor of a civilized era was much too much for the throats of the Milanese!

A fat prelate clawed at his chest and gargled, "Poison!"

That started it. Machiavelli imitated a geyser and clawed for an ewer of water. All around the table guests were suffering from Pete's unfortunate experiment with the prince's brandy.

Cesare stood up, staring. He tasted his drink, and shot a furious glance at Pete. Cursing, he whipped out his sword and leaped on the table.

"Yipe!" Mr. Manx gasped. "They can't take it! They think it's a Mickey Finn!"

"Spoil my plans, will you?" Cesare roared. "You dog! I'll cleave you in two parts!"

Pete did not wait to explain. A window shattered as he dived through it. He raced through the moonlit gardens, realizing all too well what had given Cesare Borgia his requtation as a poisoner in the centuries to come.

"Jeepers!" he groaned. "Why do these things always happen to me?"

He clambered over a wall, dodged through an alley, and found himself in the huge garden of Nesserdin. It was time for a getaway. Cesare Borgia's vengeance would be swift and sudden.

A dim figure caught up with him. Pete instinctively dodged before he recognized the Shaykh. "Oh—Pop! You'd better get back to Cesare's banquet. You can't help me now."

"I don't understand," Nesserdin said plaintively. "I liked that drink. What are you doing?"

Pete struck light to his flint and bent to kindle an already prepared bonfire. "Scramming. Clearing out," he amplified. "I figured something like this might happen." He nervously scraped some tar from the wood and rolled it into a ball between his fingers. "I'm leaving Milan, Pop."

Nesserdin blinked. "I do not understand."

Pete pointed. "See that metal cape over the bonfire? And those pipes? They lead to the valve of my balloon."

"Balloon?"

"Sure. A free balloon, lifted by hot

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air. Like—like politicians," Pete explained at random. "That's the thing I've been working on."

"Oh. I did not understand what it was."

NO one had guessed, luckily. With strong silk, Pete had made a balloon, suspended a basket under it, and prepared a bonfire to inflate the device when necessary. In his circus days, he had made balloon ascensions. It was the old stuff to him.

"It'll take a while to inflate," he added.

"Then let us drink wine," Nesserdin said. "Come! We will be safer in my palace where Cesare's men can not glimpse you."

That was true enough. In a downstairs room, Pete nervously rolled the ball of tar in his hand while he drank wine. Through the window he could see the glow of the fire. How long would it take to inflate the balloon?

Nesserdin went to a desk, found a quill and a scrap of paper. Over his shoulder he said, "Petro Mancos, you have been a good friend to me. I am in danger here. The Borgias wish the treasure I buried, but they shall not have it."

Pete gulped wine. "Yeah. I know, Pop."

The Shaykh scribbled something. "In case I meet death, I leave the treasure to you. Here is the location. You have been a good friend to me, and I have no other heirs."

Pete took the scrap of paper dumbly. "I—gee, thanks, Pop," he muttered. "But you don't have to do this. You're not going to be killed. Why not take off with me in the balloon?"

This would mean losing the treasure, of course, but somehow Pete didn't think of that just then.

Nesserlin smiled. "I do not want it. If I leave Milan, I shall return to my home in the East. I have treasures enough there. The loot on the island shall remain hidden until you take it. Besides—" He paused as something banged against the door.

Through the window Pete caught a glimpse of a bearded, hard-eyed face. The guards! Frantically he stared around. He might possibly talk himself out of this scrape, but in his hand he held the secret of the treasure. How to guard it?

Maybe he could memorize it. No, it was written in Arabic. He'd have to hide it somewhere.

As the door crashed down, Pete moved fast. The pellet of tar was still in his hand. He wadded the parchment into a tiny ball, molded the tar about it, and clicked open the locket that Cesare Borgia had given him. He thrust the little pellet into that compartment and pressed the locket shut, dropping it on the nearest table.

Nesserdin picked it up, not realizing what Pete had done. "You dropped this, Messer Mancos."

There was no time for more. Guards poured into the room. Pete, hurled back by the onslaught of a burly soldier, had only time to gasp. "Hang on to it!" before he was borne down. From the corner of his eye he saw the puzzled Nesserdin slip the locket chain about his neck.

Then the soldiers seized them and dragged them into the garden. In the distance the bonfire blazed. But a high wall shut out all sight of Cesare's palace.

Pete was dragged into a little clearing and stood up against a tree, a sword at his throat. Nesserdin was beside him. A ring of guards surrounded the pair, and a cloaked, slim figure stood facing them.

"Shaykh Nesserdin!" a musical voice said. "At last I have found you away from my brother's guards!"

Pete gulped. He was staring at a ring on the cloaked figure's left hand. He recognized it—the ring of Lucretia Borgia!

IMPULSIVELY he asked the obvious question. Lucretia's low laugh came.

"What poison do I carry in this ring? Why, you shall soon know, varlet! A cup of wine—quickly!"

One of the soldiers disappeared. Pete, tense and nervous, heard an ominous crack. It was a rope parting. The balloon, inflated with plenty of

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hot air, was tugging dangerously at its moorings. It looked bad.

Lucretia Borgia came forward. "You need not expect rescue from Cesare. He is off on a false scent. Now I have you, Nesserdin, and I shall learn the location of your buried treasure."

"Not from me," the Shaykh said grimly.

"We shall see. As for this oaf—you have the wine? Good!" Lucretia took a goblet from a guard, clicked open the secret compartment in her ring, and let a tiny pellet fall from it into the wine. "You shall taste my poison, varlet, and see how well you like it."

Another rope parted in the distance. Pete took the proffered goblet and stood motionless, waiting.

Lucretia snapped, "Drink!"

Pete did not obey. He flung the wine into the face of his guard and dodged back and dived into the darkness of the trees. A pike sang past him. He ignored it. He had a job to do.

How long would the balloon hold? Not much longer, he knew. It was like a game of hide and seek in the little wood, dodging through the shadows, evading Lucretia's guards, searching for a rope that was not too taut. At last he found it. Hastily he untied it from the tree and knotted it around his waist. Then he slipped back to the clearing.

A few of the guards were still there. Nesserdin stood fearlessly facing Lucretia. Pete took a deep breath, mustered up all his courage and circled the clearing, keeping to the shadows. It was a dangerous thing to do, but he made it without being observed.

The climax came almost before he had expected it. He felt a warning tug at the rope about his waist, and simultaneously lunged forward. He was lifted into the air, but not before his sturdy arms had clamped around Nesserdin's body. He held theShaykh in a desperate, rat-trap grip. There was a flashing, swift glimpse of Lucretia's startled face—and then the balloon broke free from its moorings and jerked Pete into the air, lifting him with a sickening, swift movement, far above the clearing in the wood.

A pike hissed past. It missed by a mile. The moonlit palace dropped away. Milan dwindled beneath them, as the balloon rose.

"What now?" Nesserdin asked. "That was a courageous rescue, Messer Mancos."

"Now," said Pete, "we climb. I've got to let some air out of that balloon!"

Ten minutes later they were in the basket, safe and sound, drifting eastward toward the Adriatic. Pete sighed with relief as he unbuckled the rope from his waist.

"Okay, Pop," he said. "We've made it. When we land, we ought to be in Turkey, if the winds hold. And you'll be safe enough there."

"Thanks to you," Nesserdin said gratefully.

"Forget it," Pete said generously. "Just gimme back my locket and—hey!" He stared at the empty, open locket the Shaykh handed over. "Where's that pill?"

"Lucretia took it," Nesserdin explained blandly. "She thought it poison and put it in her ring. Was it poison, Messer Mancos?"

"Lucretia put it in her ring!" Pete gasped. "Great jumping catfish! Nesserdin—quick! Tell me again where that treasure's hidden!"

But it was too late. Already Pete felt the giddy vertigo that heralded his return to the twentieth century. He groaned in sheer horror.

Woosh!

PETE opened his eyes. He was in Doctor Mayhem's laboratory, as he had expected. The gaunt scientist was hovering over him, clucking uneasily and glancing at his watch.

"Two-twenty-six, exactly," he said. "Did you find out what poison Lucretia Borgia used, Pete? Tell me, quick!"

"Bah!" Mr. Manx snarled. "Why couldn't you have waited five minutes!"

"The poison!" Mayhem demanded. "What was it? Did you find out?"

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Pete got up from the time-machine chair, drawing a deep breath. All too well he remembered the tarry, black little pill that his nephew had taken from the Borgia ring and swallowed.

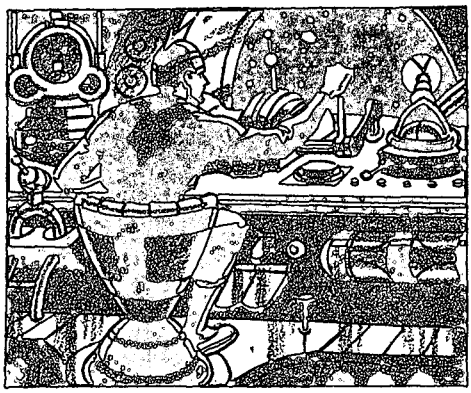
A pellet that he himself had rolled between his fingers in Nesserdin's palace, a pill that Lucretia had thought was deadly poison and had kept in her ring until her death.

"What was it?" Dr. Mayhem insisted. "Snake venom? Or strychnine?"

"Neither one," Pete growled. "You might as well tell Professor Aker to leave Joe alone. He doesn't need a stomach pump."

"But he swallowed poison!"

"Not Joe," Pete said morosely. "He didn't swallow poison. He just ate a million dollars!"



HEADLINERS IN THE NEXT ISSUE

WESTWOOD calling! N. J. Westwood, creator of the three spaceteers you meet for the first time in this present issue, returns in the next number of THRILLING WONDER STORIES with a hilarious and rollicking yarn in this series. Watch for MINNIE OF MARS, the second exploit of these three space-happy rovers of the Solar System.

* * * *

ON deck as the main cargo of the voyage is Malcolm Jameson's novel, LAND OF THE BURNING SEA. In a distant day in the future men live a machinelike existence, and the hero of this saga rebels against this fate. On the far world of the LAND OF THE BURNING SEA he proves to be the catalyst which reconciles and reunites the free thinkers and the machine-age workers.

* * * *

NEXT comes that amazing character promised us by Robert Arthur—METEORIC MR. MYRTLE, a novelet of absorbing interest about the bit of milk-toast that became a hard roll.

* * * *

DAPPER and diligent John Carstairs, the botanical detective, returns in a thrilling and incredible adventure far afield from his botanical gardens. Frank Belknap Long has given Carstairs a shot of Xeno juice and hurled him to a Jupiterian moon to fight the greatest battle of his career in SATELLITE OF PERIL.

* * * *

ENLIGHTENING and succinctly brief is the cargo of hand-picked and condensed SCIENTIFACTS, little gems of information which herald the constant march of scientific progress.

* * * *

ROUNDING out the issue will be sparkling stories, departments, and articles representing the cream of science fiction and fact. Remember to reserve your copy of August THRILLING WONDER STORIES early.

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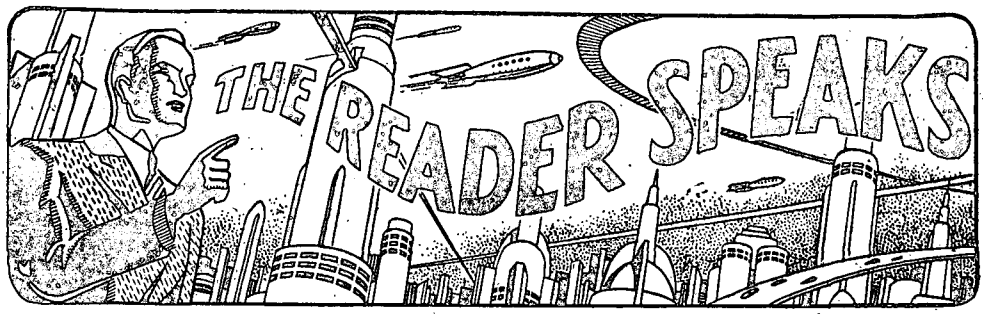

ALL right, pee-lots, seal the ports and adjust your gravity belts for a mad whirl around the space-ways to blast the smithereens out of authors and artists, and do a little sniping at the old Sarge on the side. Some fun, hey? You space apes!

Never mind, the old Space Dog will zipper on his spatial wrestling togs and feed the ether to you junior astrogators until you're dopey. Come on, who's first with a bellyache?

Oh! Just a mild, brief chirp about that Annual idea for a starter, eh? Okay, I'll set the firing order control. There! Now, let's have the grief. We're off!

THREE GOOD MAGS!
By Loren Sinn

Dear Sarge: Here's my vote for that THRILLING WONDER STORIES ANNUAL. Make it really giant size—something along the line of the old quarterlies. Your three science fiction magazines are good!—*Duvall, Wash.*

Maybe you have something there, Loren; we'll see. Here's an excerpt from a letter on our February issue which was a bit late for the April ship!

GOOD, BUT—
By Burton Boxenhora

Dear Sarge: The February TWS was pretty good and if you can keep up the good work it would be swell. The art work of the cover was good, but the picture was awful. I don't like the topic of a red devil. And the story, "This is Hell," was terrible. It's surprising that Friend, who generally writes good stories, wrote such a yarn. "Luxury Liner" was slightly sick but otherwise okay. The main novel "Via Jupiter," was swell, but please finish these stories once and for all. I don't like serials, and I hope you don't start printing them.

How about some of E. E. Smith's stories? Why the heck don't you have the cover picture depict something from the main novel? And, oh, yes—how about discarding Sarge Saturn? If I were eight I would enjoy the trash he writes.

All in all it was a pretty good edition.—*56 Featherbed Lane, The Bronx, New York, N. Y.*

Nice going, Kiwi Boxenhora. From your ethergram I gather that TWS is a swell magazine in a ghastly sort of way. By all the space gods of the Galactic System, if we ever print an issue that thoroughly satisfies every reader we're going to exhume the Time Capsule and send a special autographed copy bound in gold to those folks in the future.

And you want a cover painting to match the featured novel, do you? The old Sarge is not going to take time off from astrogation to explain in words of one syllable, or a reasonable facsimile thereof, why this isn't always feasible, but I will tell you this. Watch for the cover painting for next issue. It will beautifully illustrate a scene from the featured novel—"Land of the Burning Sea," by Malcolm Jameson.

Here's another flash on February.

THIS ISH DELISH
By Raynard Natruck

Dear Sarge: This ish of TWS is swell, wonderful, stupendous! "Via Jupiter" was the best of your "Via" series. I have them all. "Fugitive" is second best, then comes "Death on the Siderite" and "Rendezvous in the Void," "Medical Note," and "This is Hell," were poor. Well, blast my rockets, put some more "Via" series to us. Have them go to Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto to see what they find—more pyramids!

I started reading TWS when I was ten years old and now I'm nearly twice that and am still going strong. The front cover wasn't so good this time. Please have more stories by Eando Binder. He is a swell writer. So long, Sarge. See you on Mars.—*1210 East 30th St., Tacoma, Wash.*

See me nowhere if you don't start meeting the ship on time! You're one cargo shipment late as it is. If the old Sarge didn't have a kind heart—oh, well, skip it. We'll pass your request on to Eando Binder. I understand that Eando is coming up with further dope on the people who built all those mysterious pyramids. Watch for it.

Comes now another ethergram on the February cargo. Come on in, Pee-lot Tackett.

TAKING THE AUTHORS APART
By Leroy Tackett

Dear Sarge: Before me I have the Feb. ish of TWS. I gaze at the cover. I still can't believe my eyes. That pic is sickening. For once in his life Belarski did illustrate a scene from the story, BUT, the way he did it is enough to make me stay away from the Xeno jug for life.

If you must have monsters puh-leeze go back to the BEMs. Better still, throw out all monsters and give us more covers like the one on the Dec. ish. Chee, not only do we get a monster, but we also have a sky that is disgustingly greenish. Some day Belarski is going to surprise the world and do a natural color sky.

But enough about the cover, let's go inside and take the authors apart. "Via Jupiter" rates well above everything else in the issue.

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(Except, of course, the letter section.) So that is the "Secret of the Pyramids." Very interesting, but what became of the Martians?

Sarge, old boy, we must have another series. Yarns of this type are a welcome change from the mass of robots and time machines that make up the modern s-f mag.

"Luxury Liner" was swell. Bond is good; keep him. What has happened to Cummings? He used to be a good author, but now he turns out the rottenest junk I've ever read. Oh, well, feed him a vitamin pill and maybe he'll snap out of it.

"Death on the Siderite" was slightly better than "Medical Note." "This Is Hell" topped both of them. How about giving us Asimov, Gottesman, de Camp, and by all means Hamilton during this next year?

By all means give us an annual. A great big annual. The price won't make any difference. Did you ever see a fan pass up a mag because of its price? Run the price up as high as you want to, but give us a big annual.

You could improve the mag a lot if you dropped "Thrilling" from the title. Finlay and Paul would help out a lot, too. How about a cover by Finlay in the near future?

Just one more thing. These alphabetical societies should be chased out of the letter section. They were all right for a while, but now they are getting monotonous.

Thanx for listening to my ravings.—*Fountain, Colorado.*

Well, Kiwi Tackett, that's a rather mild blasting you gave the authors. You probably need a bit more U-235 in your mixing chambers—and maybe a dash of Xeno. Note my reply to the letter just before yours about Eando Binder.

One more gripe about the February cargo, and we'll be current again—and isn't that shocking!

CONGRATULATIONS, SARGE

By Paul Anderson

Dear Sarge: Congratulations! Your February issue was grand. Here's my rating:

Cover: Poor, but I've given up trying to get some decent ones. It's really only the stories that count. The best of these are, in order of my preference:

"Via Jupiter." MAGNIFICENT! Binder can WRITE! Some of his ideas are almost terrifying in their magnitude. Imagine moving, or destroying, a world! How about a "Via Pluto" story clearing up the mystery of the disappearing Martians?

"Luxury Liner" and "Death on the Siderite" tie for second place. Maybe I misread the former, but I thought I saw two errors in it, to wit: (1) The author gave the impression that there was air on Phobos, when everyone knows that that moon is far too tiny for that. (2) The characters escaped from the positively charged magnetic asteroid by giving their ship a negative charge because OPPOSITES REPEL—well! Oh, well, the story itself was excellent.

As for "Death on the Siderite," it was a classic horror story. I looked under the bed when I turned in after reading it. And the science was good too. Ah, me! Incidentally, the illustration for it was the best in the issue. Who did the drawing?

"Fugitive," was tolerable, a rare occurrence in a Cummings story. The rest were mediocre, but "Medical Note" gave me an idea. How about a series on doctors of the future? There's quite a lot of possible situations—interplanetary hunts for the cure to some disease, for instance.

I'd like to reiterate my appeal that you put out an all-Weinbaum issue, as Mr. de la Ree suggested a while ago. Or, if this isn't practical, get your book department or something to publish a Weinbaum omnibus, with all the works of this greatest of science-fiction authors.

Weinbaum, by the way, was the only stf writer who could put romance in a story without detracting from its appeal at least a little. Usually the result is a ghastly female drooling at some brave, strong, handsome (and therefore uninteresting) hero, "Oh, *Reginald, you saved me from that horrible Xzderg!* My darling!" Ugh! Lunar tornadoes! If you must have women in stf (and they're okay when they're not drooling mush—witness Miss Carlyle) why not have them single, or already married, like Mrs. Anton York? And incidentally, when is the famous scientist coming back?

I hate to admit it, but Sergeant Saturn really has an idea in this TWS Annual. Here's my vote for it.

Now I want to howl about something that's been preying on my so-called mind for some time. I refer to the present misuse of the word "alien" in stf.

As an adjective or noun it's nice and descriptive—IN MODERATE DOSES. BUT—when an author's every third word is "alien," that's going too far.

It's a cloying, insidious urge. The habit is fatally easy to contract. It's so simple to describe a thing as alien and let it go at that—much easier than hunting up a lot of other words. Soon you're a slave to it.

Be brave, authors! Fight this evil habit! Use your willpower! Firmly resolve not to use alien before breakfast. That first step taken, you will find it easier and easier not to use the word at all. After a good long vacation it will regain its former descriptiveness.

To further this noble cause I, like everyone else in this dizzy column, hereby form a society—The S. F. T. P. O. O. O. T. W. A. (Society for the Prevention of Overwork of the Word Alien). Anybody want to join?

Miscellaneous suggestions for TWS: Get some high-class authors like Heinlein, deCamp, and Asimov; artists like Rogers, St. John, and Orban. But no Bok, please. He's terrible.

How about a space ship designing contest? Entries should include drawings and a complete written description of construction, operation, et al. I've got some ideas up my sleeve, and I suppose every fan has his private notions of how the thing should be done.

Put the novels back in small type and give us more stories. And more articles, too, on some really SCIENTIFIC subjects. For instance, how about a series on the latest discoveries in all branches of scientific subjects. For instance, how about a series on the latest discoveries in all branches of science-astronomy, physics, medicine, and so forth? Or a good, detailed discussion of relativity? That would be a real treat.

Well, I've blown off all my accumulated steam now, and so will depart to my palatial Venusian mansion. But I'll be back.—*Box 32-A, Randolph, Minn.*

Quite a fresh communique, Kiwi Anderson. Before the old Space Dog confines you to quarters for a couple of watches, we might as well answer some of the points you raise. Maybe Author Nelson S. Bond will answer your scientific argument anent "Luxury Liner." About Weinbaum, I believe an omnibus of his has already been printed. Maybe some of you other kiwis can drop Paul a line and give him the dope on this. If the old Sarge's memory doesn't fail him, a sort of memorial volume or two was brought out a year or so ago.

As for the new society you are forming in the alphabet soup group, you can fight for your honor with your brother and sister officers. The old Sarge is not going to take sides, for to do so would be partisan, and anything partisan is one-sided, and anything one-sided is odd, and anything odd is strange, and anything strange is alien—and that's just what you are trying to suppress.

No soap at present on the blue-print contest idea. The old Sarge doesn't think much of the smaller type idea. As for articles, while some of the kiwis holler like

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Venusian Blue Marsh apes when we print them, there will be an increased variety of them the ensuing year. Leo Morey illustrated "Death on the Siderite."

Consider yourself answered and get back to your astrogation charts.

And here we are, finally up to date with reports on the April issue. Take it away, Kiwi Brown.

MAKE TWS MONTHLY
By Tommy Brown

Dear Sarge: I have just finished the April issue of TWS. Most of the stories were poor or far below par, but "Regeneration," by Cummings was good as his stories generally are. Also "Super-Athlete," "Twisted Dimensions," and last, but not least "Spaceman's Savvy" were pretty good, but nothing to boast about.

All in all it was a pretty poor issue. Why don't you have more Pete Manx and Via stories? They are some of the best, if not the best you have ever printed and I have ever read. Why clutter up your magazine and bore your readers with stuff like "The Infinite Moment" and "The Plastic Genie"? Do not put too much technical stuff in. Logical explanations for what the heroes of a story do are all right, but not too much of it.

Instead of an annual, why don't you make your magazine a monthly? But if you must have an annual make it a good one, with lots of old classics and good new stories never before printed.

Another gripe I have is that you have too many departments. Why not instead of a lot of articles, etc., don't you publish an extra short story or two? I'm sure a good percentage of your other readers will agree with me there! I hope, I hope, I hope!

It looks as if there is going to be a first-class feud between Ebey and Benham. If so my sympathies are all with you, Ebey. You are absolutely right. Zounds! Bring Zarnak back. What does he want to do, wreck the poor magazine? But I suppose it takes all kinds.

I really think TWS is swell. Why don't you publish it monthly? Meanwhile I will be anxiously awaiting more Pete Manx and Via stories. Don't disappoint me, please. Kent—rah, rah, rah! Cummings—three cheers!—*no address.*

And just after the old Space Dog got through promising a few more articles, too. So you space monkeys see how it goes. No sooner do we get the port rockets firing in smooth order, than we have a staccato outburst of firing from starboard. At times the old Sarge feels like planting a charge of T.N.T. in all your stern rockets and heading you for Callistro. No word from Pee-lots Ebey and Benham this voyage. Maybe they're fighting it out with electron rings on Pluto.

LYDIA LANGUISH FAINTS
By Bill Watson

Dear Sarge: "Unk! Ulp! Oh my. . . ."

Then I fainted dead away.

The druggist came over, looked at the magazine that was clutched in my hand, and then he fainted.

The waitress at the fountain looked at the mag, let out a howl and went screaming up the street.

I won't inform you as to the details that followed except that the riot squad was called out and ordered to burn all mags with that particular cover. Need I say more?

The stories in the April issue were exceedingly well done, "The Infinite Moment" being the best. It had the strength of Weinbaum's work, the suspense of Lovecraft's, the characterization of Heinlein, and about as much science as you'll find in a cowboy story.

"Super-Athlete" takes second. It would have fit better in a sports magazine though.

In third place we have "Twisted Dimensions." I always did like humor in my stories. Glad you printed it.

Fourth we find "Plants Must Slay." Don't print too many of this series. They're beginning to get tiresome.

Fifth place: Cummings' "Regeneration." Old plot. . . . Hack writer. . . . But I enjoyed it. I wonder why?

Sixth: "Plastic Genie." Haven't we had enough Frankensteins?

Seventh: "Spaceman's Savvy." Foo!

Schomburg is back! Yahoo! This fellow is really good. Remember his work for "The Man Without a World"?

I see that two of my letters have been printed. Many thanks, Sarge, old bean. Or is it bag? Ah, well we'll let it go since you're my commanding officer.

Hurry up with that annual!

My finger is getting tired. Take over, Pappy, while I go out and lick my weight in termites. I guess I'll have to pass out again. Hand me that cover.—*1299 California St., San Francisco, Calif.*

The old Sarge thought the April cover rather striking himself. As usual, opinion on the cover and on the cover story is divided. Some day we're going to print a blank cover and let you space harpies draw your own illustration.

I have next a mash note for the Sarge.

COCKROACH POWDER
By Monroe Mayer

Dear Sarge—you pain in the neck: I just got the April issue of TWS. There is no doubt "The Infinite Moment" is one of the finest stories I ever read—that is, in science fiction. It reminded me of Frederic Arnold Kummer's story two years ago about the civilization in the diamond. I forget the name. The Robot Saga stories of Ray Cummings rate up with the Eando Binder stories of Anton York and the "Via" boys.

I guess I must have something in common with Raymond Washington, Jr., because I started reading TWS with the August, 1938, issue, too. "The Exterminators" also by Kummer, Jr., was a "loo-loo." By the way, where is Kummer? And where are Carlyle and Quade?

I am waiting impatiently for the 15th anniversary issue. I will never forget the 10th. Yes, definitely I want a TWS quarterly **and** from TWS only. Old and new, so the readers can compare the old-time writers with the new fellows.

And now, if I had your Xeno jug, I would load it with cockroach powder and do TWS a favor. And as for that half-baked brother, The Bos'n, in EXCITING NAVY STORIES—the same for him.—*56 Bennett Ave., New York City.*

Listen, chum, any crow you have to pick with the Bos'n, you take up with that gob in person. Don't start mixing your chief astrogator with those Earth-bound swabs. Now climb back into your bunk and strap yourself down before you get space-sick. Or perhaps we've had enough bunk from you. In that case, take a double watch in the astrogation chamber.

CEILING ZERO
By Thomas Regan, Jr.

Sarge: This is going to be short but not sweet. The only artists that I think are halfway decent in TWS are Wesso and Schmoberg—and we don't see much of either of

(Continued on page 118)

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Something searched Callister's mind while he lay in hypnotic slumber

FALSE DAWN

By HENRY KUTTNER

The Fingers of Madness That Plucked at Callister's Brain Thrust Forth from a Hand of His Own Design!

EAST of Hollywood, in the mountains of the Angeles Forest, lived an extraordinarily dirty hermit who irritated Hays Callister like the jagged edge of a broken tooth. Figuratively, Callister kept touching the tooth with his tongue, though he used his binoculars to stare across the valley at the cave where the hermit lived.

Quite often Callister wanted to murder the man.

He stood at the door of his house and focused the glasses against strong morning sunlight. Yes, the hermit was there, having breakfast. The *chef d'oeuvre* seemed to be a gigantic bone, on which the hairy, filthy creature was gnawing avidly. Crouched in a patch of sunlight, he gnawed with an air of unselfconscious atavism, unkempt, ragged and utterly detestable.

Suddenly the hermit turned and

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stared down the valley, his attention attracted by the flash of the binoculars in the light. Callister's patrician, handsome face twisted wryly. He fled indoors and drank coffee royal, while he pondered over more pleasant matters. But the bestial face of the hermit kept intruding on his thoughts.

It was a jarring note in the biologist's life-pattern. Like Epicurus, Hays Callister had surrounded himself with reflections of his own culture and esthetic tastes. His fetish was the fact that he was civilized. His home, personally built and planned ten miles from the nearest settlement, was a warmly glowing jewel.

The laboratory provided no jarring note, for it was functional. Callister was a Des Essientes without decadence, a man perfectly fitted to his adjusted environment. There were no false notes.

Civilization and egotism—But there was no flaw in Callister. Sleek, catlike, physically perfect, he relaxed in his chair, savoring the subtle flavor of brandy, and smoked a cigarette. Tommy, his Filipino servant, appeared with the obtrusiveness of a shadow and replenished his master's cup. Unmoral and completely obedient, Tommy was. That would help.

Technically, the experiment wouldn't be murder. But in a way, it was vivisection. Fastidiously Callister turned from the melodramatic thought; he was simply making use of a tool at hand.

His partner, Sam Prendergast, was in the way. Loud, and blatant Prendergast, with that offensively hearty laugh of his. Hm-m. Sam, of course, was well fitted for the experiment.

Personal dislike entered little into the matter. Prendergast had financed Callister, and thereafter felt that his money entitled him to "keep an eye on things." It was impossible to tell the man to go to the devil, for new emergencies kept arising, and more money was continually needed.

The whale, for example, and the Sirenia. The former experiment had almost failed, on account of the physical difficulties, but the manatee had altered surprisingly.

The point was this: Prendergast owned a controlling interest in the process, and would interfere fatally. He wanted to form a company, endow a fountain, do God knew how many things. He was bursting with schemes. Since Callister preferred to work in his own way, it was necessary to get rid of Sam Prendergast.

Once that was done, Callister could foist some other process upon the heirs. That was practical enough, for he had framed the partnership papers with an eye to the future. They were binding but vague. Only Prendergast himself could prove that the process mentioned was—

Well, Callister had given it no name. There *was* no name which didn't sound too fantastic.

SAM PRENDERGAST came in. He was a bulky man, about forty, hearty-voiced and a lovely specimen of an extrovert. Dogs and small children loved him. Sinclair Lewis had vainly debunked his type. The odd part of it was that Sam was really a nice guy.

He wore—of course—tweeds. His hair was unusually long. Callister's searching eye noticed a slight jut to the jaw, an almost imperceptible recession of the frontal bone. And—was Sam stooping slightly this morning?

"Hi," said Prendergast. "Coffee. Swell. I've got a headache." He relapsed into a chair and screamed for the Filipino.

"Well, you insisted on coming up here—"

"I like it. These last steps, the final experiments. That little monkey's wonderful. And the penguin —*wings!*"

"It's fantastic," Callister acknowledged. "I'm really afraid to release the news of the process yet. We'd be laughed at."

"Not with the proof we can offer," Prendergast said stoutly.

"Just the same, they might swallow the theory that we'd got a method of developing recessive characteristics, which isn't true. But if we said we could reverse evolution—"

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"We've done it."

"But we can't just say so. The ground has to be laid first. Uh—cut yourself?"

Prendergast was fingering his chin. He nodded.

"My beard's got tough as nails. I've never seen it grow so fast."

"Ah," said Callister thoughtfully, and was silent, eying the other man's ears. The lobes were growing smaller, day by day.

"I'm going home today," Prendergast said, with sudden decision. "Letters piling up at the office—you know. A week is long enough."

"More coffee?" Callister suggested.

When the Filipino came in, he gave the order, and made an unobtrusive signal with his hand.

"As you like, Sam. The final experiments are pretty well finished. But I really don't want you to release the news yet."

"Just the same, that's one reason I'm going back to the city. I can't wait to get the reporters up."

Callister flushed.

"They'll make us a laughingstock. They won't wait to be shown the proof. It'd be much better to proceed gradually—"

"But we've got the proof. We've grown wings on penguins and legs on manatees!"

"Freaks, they'll say. It takes time to perform the process. It has to gather momentum. The first week there's very little change, you know."

"But the second week! Jelly!"

"The basic unicellular organism. Sure. The life cycle's paralleled in the foetus, in miniature, and we just reverse it."

Prendergast brooded.

"Costs a fortune in food supplies," he said.

"The metabolism's tremendous. Even with the refrigeration system we've got, the subjects are in a high fever all the time. As you know, Sam, it's growth, reversed. The pattern's already set, but we reverse the charge from positive to negative. Positive—evolution. Negative — retrogression. Eventually I'll find some way of speeding up the positive charge. Perhaps creating super-beings."

"Not yet," Prendergast said, with a little shudder, and Callister echoed the words.

"No—not yet. We're after the practical side just now. Probing all those abortive offshoots of nature that died out or were altered."

"That whale—"

CALLISTER remembered. At San Pedro, in a roofed-in pool, the young cetacean had been subjected to the influences of the process. It had altered, the body growing less streamline, the mouth-seine disintegrating, teeth appearing. The tail, tadpole-like, grew smaller and disappeared. Strangest of all, there were, eventually, legs, fore and aft.

They could not support the tremendous weight of the body, and the pool had to be half-drained. One day the thing had lurched forward and burst free. It was either dead now, or living an odd sort of life in the Pacific, a semi-fossil, halted in transition to its ancient status as a land-dweller.

There had been other experiments, many of them. The most curious vanished traits had reappeared, organs fitted for an environment long since past—

Tommy came in with more coffee. Prendergast sipped his fresh cup noisily.

"Ape!" Callister thought, and then: "Oh, well."

It was simply a matter of doing things to the chromosomes or the pineal or the nerve-stuff. Partly it was working in the dark. The pattern was there, all set. It had begun with a unicellular sea-thing, which had developed spots sensitive to light—cancerous, indeed, Callister theorized.

Light irritated the amoeba, and so in self-protection it had developed eyes, which capitalized on the initial weakness and gave the creature vision. And so on. The ultimate distillate of mankind was compounded of several liqueurs poured in over a period of cyclic ages. Reverse the process.

The primeval marsupial had a pouch but no tail. When it became

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arboreal, it got a tail. Then its brain developed, and there was caudal revision.

Take the constant matrix, the biologic mold in which things are cast. Flood it with a negative instead of a positive current, concentrate that current strongly, and presently a tail would grow.

The whale and the manatee had acquired their ancient legs. The penguin now had wings. The pony's hoofs were three-toed—*echippus*. The sloth had grown, eating voraciously, and walked on four feet, instead of dangling from a branch. Some of the birds were now scaled.

Yes, Callister thought, some of the ancient traits might be valuable. The most practical part of the magical ability to mold human organisms. The process was crude now. Delicacy would come later—cross-breeding, developing strength and intelligence and specialized abilities. Living robots, molded to any purpose.

Meantime Prendergast was in the way. He was asleep now, as the drugged coffee took effect. Callister called the Filipino. With the silent little man's aid, he carried Prendergast into a small prisonlike room near the laboratory. It had no furniture but a pallet and plumbing facilities, and there was an unbreakable glass observation window in the door, punctured with tiny holes.

The room was air-conditioned and equipped with refrigerating apparatus. The ceiling was of plastic that made no barrier to the ray utilized in the process.

Callister stripped Prendergast and examined his body carefully. The man was unquestionably hairier. Each night he had been exposed to the process, and he subtly showed it. Callister made X-rays, took blood and skin samples, and checked them.

The hide was tougher. The red corpuscles were present in larger quantity in the blood. Temperature, of course, was higher. The X-rays hinted rather than revealed. Bone is hard, even in an evolutionary crucible.

Since Prendergast had been under treatment for a week, it was safe to step up the current. The changes would be rapid now. The man would degenerate, retracing the natural pattern, till he melted down to a blob of jelly. And what a curious sort of *corpus delicti* that would be as Exhibit A!

IF Prendergast had only been a bit more civilized, this wouldn't be necessary. But personal animosity had entered into the question. Catlike, Callister shrank from his partner's jovial familiarity. Prendergast was only a step above the degenerate hermit across the valley.

Callister was civilized. A cut above the average. He regarded most of humanity with good-natured contempt, but kept his skirts clear.

Presently he had lunch, smoked, strolled down the valley and back, and played a few Mozart records. Then he examined Prendergast through the peep-hole. The man was still unconscious, but the change was beginning to be unmistakable.

He was hairier.

Callister touched his own closely shaved cheek and went to the laboratory. Some hours later Tommy appeared.

"Yes?"

"He iss awake," the Filipino lisped.

"All right. I'll see to that."

Prendergast was awake, all right, his face pressed against the glass panel. Not stupid, he grasped the implications immediately.

"How much do you want, Callister?" Through the perforations in the window, his voice was clearly audible.

"To let you go? Sorry. Too much of a risk. Besides, I want to watch this experiment.

Prendergast licked his lips.

"I'll turn over the entire process to you."

Callister monkeyed with a turntable arrangement in the wall.

"Here's food. You'll need a lot of it from now on. And a mirror, for your own amusement."

"Callister!"

"But I can't do anything now, obviously. I can't let you go. I'd give

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you some books to pass the time, but I know you'll be too worried to read. I'll give you sleeping powders, though, a few at a time, if you like."

There was a silence.

"All right."

"I'll have to see you take them, though. You might save them and take a lethal dose."

"You devil!" Prendergast said, in a voice too shaken to be rancorous.

"Want a powder?"

"No. Callister, can't we — somehow—"

"We can't," said Callister, and swung the turntable. He went away, leaving Prendergast to his food.

It was not pleasant after that, for Callister was neither a sadist nor a machine. He simply shut off his mind to the distressing aspects of the experiment. The process continued with rapidly increasing acceleration. Lost characteristics returned to Prendergast.

By the end of the day he was hump-shouldered, awkward, unable to cross his thumb over his palm. His toes were mobile. His skin was flushed, and he ate tremendously, despite the refrigeration. He drank gallons of water and broth, and ate largely of the vitamin capsules that were supplied to him.

At sundown he was not quite unrecognizable. Cro-Magnon, perhaps. Piltdown came later. Pithecanthropus—

Two nights later Prendergast escaped, by means of the turntable in the wall. His strength was surprising. He had bent metal, presumably with his bare hands. Returning from a stroll, Callister went white when he saw the Filipino in a crumpled heap in the hall. He ran to his laboratory, snatched a gun and began his investigation.

Tommy wasn't dead, just stunned. Splay footprints outside the house showed where Prendergast had gone. Callister loaded another weapon with mercy bullets and took up the hunt. If the man-beast could still communicate with humans, the jig would be up.

But Prendergast couldn't talk, and his hands were too awkward to hold pen or pencil. Just the same—

CALLISTER traced the fugitive to the private road, and along it to the macadamized alternate route through the mountains. A girl was moving rapidly toward him, having hysterics in transit. She fainted at sight of his dimly glimpsed figure.

Callister administered first-aid. He had seen the girl once or twice, knew she lived a few miles down the road, and guessed at what had happened. She woke up and explained with some attempt at coherence.

"A terrible gorilla—" she began.

"Don't be frightened. You're safe enough." Callister showed her his revolver, and she quieted.

"I was riding my bike down the road when it jumped out at me. I—ran right into it. It picked me up and started snarling and growling."

Callister's eyes widened.

"Well?" he prodded.

"I thought—I don't know what. Finally I broke away and ran. It started after me, and then went back to the bicycle and climbed on it. I jumped into the bushes, and the thing went right past, down the hill. So I came up the other way."

"Uh-huh. It's harmless. A trained gorilla. I bought it a while ago—Come back to my place and I'll drive you home."

The girl gasped with relief. Callister pulled at his lower lip. Prendergast was heading for the nearest town, Altadena, in the foothills above Pasadena. If he could overtake the fugitive—

He got his car, dropped the girl at her place, and shot down the road like a Juggernaut. Pines cast geometrical shadows ahead of him. The headlights glazed a white, searching swath. There was no sign of Prendergast.

No, there was no sign of him—*it*. By road, the distance was ten miles through and around the mountains. The man-beast had taken short-cuts, carrying the bicycle with him. Here and there were traces where he had dropped swiftly down slopes and firebrakes. His agility and strength were a match for the car, partly because of the low-speed road and the hairpin turns.

Callister wondered about finger-

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prints. Were Prendergast's still recognizable?

He saw the bicycle, a twisted wreck, in his path. Hard usage had proved too much for the machine. But the lights of Altadena were spread below, and isolated window-squares glowed much closer. A roadhouse was half a mile distant. Callister jammed on his brakes as he heard significant sounds from the underbrush.

No—a frightened deer. He speeded up. The roadhouse?

Prendergast was in the roadhouse. The yells proved that. When Callister came through the door, he saw a riot. In the dim light, men and women were boiling around, an expanding cosmos fleeing from the gorilla-creature in the center of the floor. The orchestra leader on his dais was holding a saxophone defensively, while a strip-teaser cowered behind him.

Prendergast stood there for a moment, staring around, inhuman and grotesque. A curious moment of calm succeeded. The patrons hesitated, paused, and waited, wondering perhaps if this was part of the floor show.

Callister felt a momentary qualm at the bulk of the brute across the room. His guns seemed utterly futile.

Prendergast saw him. The thick lips writhed. The apish being stooped, peering through the gloom, eyes reflecting the light.

NO recognition was there. Prendergast's gaze wandered, fastened on a plate of sandwiches nearby. He lumbered toward them, hunkered down and began to feed.

His brain, as well as his body, had been processed, Callister saw. Some blind instinct had led Prendergast to the outskirts of Altadena. He was no longer—intelligent.

Callister breathed deeply and lifted his gun. He pumped high-powered mercy bullets into Prendergast's thick hide. The powerful anesthetic took effect almost immediately.

Prendergast's hairy skin twitched all over his gross body. He looked around, still stuffing sandwiches into his mouth. Then he slumped down, harmless and horrible.

Horrible indeed, Callister thought, as he superintended the loading of the limp, unconscious creature into the back of his car. He had had to talk fast, but a call to the Altadena authorities had arranged matters satisfactorily.

A harmless, trained gorilla had escaped from his private menagerie in the mountains. Yes—quite harmless. There was no danger. And some greenbacks passed surreptitiously to the orchestra leader and the master of ceremonies proved the final touch.

An officer rode back with Callister to the house, and he was not averse to that companionship. He was not afraid of Prendergast, but he shrank fastidiously from the presence of this—this creature.

There was talk, and more explanations, and by midnight Callister went to bed, tired but relieved. Prendergast was back in his cell. Tough steel bars had been welded across the turntable opening by Tommy, who had recovered consciousness soon after Callister left the house. The officer was gone, overawed by the laboratory. He had seen nothing suspicious.

Prendergast was once more under the influence of the process. From now on, retrogression would be rapid, incredibly so. And the terrible strength of the pithecanthropus would vanish. Agility, not power was the next step backward.

Prendergast grew a tail.

A few days passed. Prendergast turned into a marsupial. He was much smaller, and looked like a lemur, big-eyed and large-eared.

Callister waited. He was no longer fearful of investigation. Prendergast's business office ran smoothly, though once a manager telephoned. Nothing untoward came of that.

Prendergast changed under Callister's eyes. The extraordinary acceleration of the process made the scene like an unreeling film. Prendergast spent all his time eating. Concentrated food was necessary in order to keep pace with the increased metabolism.

Then Prendergast lost his pelt. He was hairless for an hour or so. After that he grew scales.

He shot back along the evolutionary

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path like a rocket. Long since he had reached the main trunk, so there were no offshoots such as wings. Functional and protean, he devolved.

After a while, Callister placed him in an aquarium in the cell. Prendergast flopped about feebly and blew a spray of water at the man.

It was then eight o'clock at night, and Callister was very tired. In an hour or less, Prendergast would be reduced to the original unicellular organism. Probably less, for the process was accelerating continually. Eons were bridged in moments.

There was no point in waiting any longer. The job was practically finished. Callister eyed the aquarium and let the hint of an amused smile play about the corners of his mouth. In the morning, he knew, what was left of Prendergast would be gone.

At the door Callister paused, not quite knowing why. Some vague, indefinable premonition troubled him. He shrugged it off and went in search of a nightcap of brandy and soda. Silently he toasted Prendergast—or, rather, his memory.

"It's been supremely logical," he mused. "The higher organism always must triumph. Which is right, of course. Well—"

He crushed out his cigarette and went to bed. His dreams were pleasant. They would have been less pleasant had Callister known what was happening in Prendergast's prison.

FOR a while there had been no change. In the cell it was utterly silent. The invisible rays streamed down through the plastic of the ceiling, bathing and permeating the body of the creature that had been Sam Prendergast. Almost formless, with rudimentary fins and tail, it lay motionless at the bottom of the aquarium, its gills quivering as it breathed.

Then it began to alter.

The fins retracted and vanished. Presently the creature was completely featureless; eyeless, for it did not see; lungless, for it had no need to breathe. It shrank, dwindling as its activity suddenly increased. The amoeba was seeking food.

That period did not last long. By the time the organism was invisible to the naked eye, it had stopped feeding. It was a filterable virus, the basic life-spore—little more than merely an electric, atomic pattern of a life organism.

The evolutionary depths were plumbed. Sam Prendergast had gone back to the abyss from which the human race had so laboriously climbed. He was back in the nebulous, unearthly beginning.

The cell seemed empty. Bare, silent, sterile, it held neither sound nor movement. The rays continued to pour down.

Then something happened.

It was a little thing, but tremendous in its significance. It was a phenomenon that seemed utterly illogical. Prendergast had *reversed*. For the rays that originally had brought about his evolutionary recession were still sending their forces into the prison.

What happened was simply this: an amoeba appeared in the aquarium.

It remained featureless for only a few minutes. Light-spots appeared on its surface, and the vestige of a minuscule digestive tract could have been seen under a strong microscope. Pseudopods thrust out, and did not retract.

The thing had fins and a tail, as well as gills. It grew and developed visibly. It—returned!

In an hour it was a ganoid fish. Another hour, and it was a tiny, scaled reptile. In the evolutionary crucible its flesh changed and altered almost visibly. The scales gave place to an adaptation—hair.

And now it was a marsupial.

The night drew slowly on, a night of sheer fantasy, while the being that had once been Sam Prendergast mounted the ladder of time once more. Presently he looked like a lemur.

That phase passed almost at once. He was pithecanthropus — shortly, pithecanthropus erectus. The apish being crouched in the center of the cell, eyes closed, body torn and twisted by the frightful speed of the ordeal. Piltdown — Cro-Magnon — Homo sapiens—

The rays poured down. Gradually,

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almost imperceptibly, a further change was worked. The being, having become human, did not halt at that point. He continued to alter.

He continued to alter, and the mental change was far greater than the physical, though the latter was curious enough. The body elongated, stretching millimetre by millimetre till it was nearly seven feet tall. The joints of knee and elbow had developed so that they now worked on the ball-and-socket principle.

On the man's forehead, above and between the eyebrows, was a third eye, which with the others made a fleur-de-lis pattern. Its longitudinal axis was vertical, and it was a variation of the pineal gland, a further development.

There were other points of interest. He was a telepath, for one thing. And his brain was the greatest thinking machine that had existed on Earth for unknown millions of years.

THE superman rose. His mind began to function.

He walked toward the door, his body automatically adjusting its atomic structure as he approached the barrier. He was scarcely conscious of the physical adjustment that was so natural to him. His electronic pattern—the matter that made up his body—changed.

He stepped *through* the door without opening it. Cold moonlight was silvering the corridor in which he now stood.

New patterns of thought interlocked in his brain. Slowly he began to understand. But it was not easy. He had no memory—only intelligence.

The intelligence of a superman.

He found his way to the laboratory by sheer chance, and for a long time stood looking through the darkness that was no hindrance to his nyctaloptic sight. Then he moved purposefully forward.

* * * * *

AT DAWN Callister awoke, though not completely. He had the curious, dreamlike feeling that something was reaching into his mind, probing, searching and then deadening his will, as though with some fantastic mental soporific.

He lay for a timeless eternity in the dim half-world between sleep and wakefulness, almost conscious of the fact that his brain was being searched while he was held in hypnotic slumber.

The sensation passed suddenly. Callister became wide awake of an instant. He opened his eyes and sat up, staring at the noon-tide sunlight pouring hotly through the windows. Odd! He had not overslept for years. Nor had he been troubled with nightmares.

Scowling, he rang for Tommy. There was no answer. Callister found robe and slippers, dashed cold water over his face, and went in search of the Filipino. But at the door of his laboratory he paused, hearing an unfamiliar sound from within. What the devil! Was Tommy trespassing on forbidden ground?

Angrily Callister flung open the door and took two steps into the room, before his mind comprehended what his eyes saw. Then he stopped abruptly, a tight band clamping over his heart. The laboratory was—changed!

There was new apparatus, for one thing—equipment that was completely unfamiliar to Callister. That glowing box in the corner might be a crucible, perhaps. Near it had been flung a pile of discarded tools—microscopes, oscillators and the like. The machine that was being built in the center of the room was a complete enigma, paradoxical in its simplicity and the impression of complexity that it gave.

But what stopped Callister in his tracks was the sight of the naked, three-eyed man who was working on the machine.

Callister sensed danger and instantly leaped aside, yanking open a drawer. His hand closed on the cold bulk of an automatic. The feel of the corrugated metal was reassuring. As Callister whirled, he saw, with a sense of shock, that the three-eyed man had not even turned to look at him.

"Who the devil are you?" he snapped, lifting the gun. "Do you talk English?"

The giant's muscular back was toward Callister, but a thought entered the latter's mind, reminding him

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of his inexplicable dream that morning. At first the sensation was like a lightning flash in darkness. Then Callister's brain steadied as something akin to a—a *hand* gripped it.

"Put down your weapon," the message came.

FIGHTING with all his will, Callister saw himself lay the automatic back in its drawer. Unarmed, he stared at the giant, who was continuing his cryptic task as though Callister did not exist. But the being was still conscious of him, for the telepathic message continued to flow into Callister's mind. Somehow the thoughts were translated into words.

"I searched your memory-patterns this morning; I must thank you for your help. When I first realized myself, I had no memories. I was a machine that had never worked. It was necessary for me to find the answer to the puzzle of my own existence."

Callister caught his breath. Who was this—being? Where— In answer to the unspoken thought, the answer flashed vividly. The giant had wakened to intelligent life in the cell that had housed Prendergast.

"I found the answer, Callister." He went on working, devoting only a part of his attention to the telepathed conversation. "Luckily, my brain is sufficiently well developed. I had to use logic. I have been away, disembodied in space-time. Here is the answer."

Slowly, gradually, Callister began to understand the incredible truth.

It had started in the immeasurable past, before life began on Earth. It had started when a ship had left another galaxy. In it were the three-eyed people. The space voyage took a long time. Not hundreds or thousands of years, but more than that. The ship passed through a region of space where the evolutionary process was reversed. Callister had discovered that same principle, isolating it.

But the three-eyed people degenerated. The change was too sudden for them to save themselves. Instruments became useless in hands that had lost their suppleness. They devolved.

As Prendergast had devolved, they changed back and back until they had reached the amoebic state. Then the ship, robot controlled, reached the Earth, landed and opened its ports. Inside were unicellular organisms which had once been a ruling race.

Outside was the right environment. But there was no life. Hot seas rolled around a young planet.

Inside were the basic life organisms, life-spores which had once been near-human beings. They filtered out of the ship.

On the Earth evolution began again. Affected by environment, some became the progenitors of vegetables. Some became microbes, and survived unchanged. Others grew, in the ancient waters, and acquired irritated spots which became eyes.

They evolved, finally, to backboned creatures, and at last to man. They were creeping back along the evolutionary road they had catastrophically descended. In a few hundred thousand years later than the present day, they would have regained their lost ground.

But Prendergast had been subjected to the process, had been thrust back to the amoeba and the spore, and had climbed the hill on the other side of the valley. The acceleration of the process had completed the job in a night. Prendergast had become a specimen of the primal three-eyed race, as it had existed on its own planet. There were certain changes, of course, due to environment and the error-margin of— Callister didn't catch the rest of it.

ANYHOW, Prendergast had been kicked down the evolutionary ladder, into the primeval pit. Callister hadn't known that there was another ladder on the other side of the pit.

"There will be changes. When you are ready to be made as I am, to regain your lost heritage, come to me and we will work together."

"You can't! The police will—" Callister began incoherently.

"We must take precautions. It will be best to be isolated. A force-shell

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will enclose this settlement. Interference would prove distracting."

The sight of that unheeding back was too much for Callister. He felt his stomach go bottomless. Worst of all was the realization of his own helplessness. The giant was so completely inhuman!

"You cannot yet comprehend my outlook. Later, you will be as I am, and be supremely grateful for it."

Not even his thoughts were private! Callister, with a sudden feeling of terror gripping him, sprang back into the hall. Fear spurred him as he fled. But the three-eyed man did not take up in pursuit.

His mind a chaotic turmoil, Callister got his car out of the garage and turned into the driveway. He caught sight of Tommy standing not far away, and jammed on the brakes.

"Get in! We'll go after the police—"

"They can do nothing," the Filipino telepathed. "I am undergoing the process. You will do the same, when you are ready."

"Good God!"

Tommy smiled.

"There is a method of bridging the evolutionary gap without descending to the primeval spore. A short-cut through space-time—"

Callister let out the clutch and sent the heavy car racing perilously up the slope.

On his way out of the mountains, he drove past a house he recognized—the home of the girl whose bicycle Prendergast had taken a few days ago. Parked in the driveway was a forest ranger's car, the pine-tree insignia painted on the door. Callister, after a moment's hesitation, stopped and hurried toward the lodge.

The ranger was there, and the girl and her family. Their reaction was one Callister might have expected. They thought he was drunk.

"Confound it, man, I insist that you investigate! If you—"

"Now hold on a minute, Mr. Callister. Let me get this straight."

"Are you going to go back to my place and—and—"

It ended with them all at cross purposes, and Callister flinging out of the lodge to clamber into his car and continue down the mountain. He got perhaps a mile further before the engine stopped. There was a force-barrier in existence.

Later, he found that it was like a transparent bowl inverted over the region, with his own home the center. But that came later. The immediate problem was to escape. Callister tried all of the few roads, and most of the trails, before he admitted that he was trapped.

It was sundown when he went back to his own house. He stopped at a safe distance, noticing that the ranger's car was parked in the driveway.

Working here and there in the grounds, at rather baffling tasks, were six figures. Tommy and the three-eyed giant were there, and so was the ranger. The girl and her parents were the others.

Even at that distance, Callister could see that Tommy was beginning to change.

A message telepathed into his mind.

"Are you ready to join us yet? You will be welcome—"

Callister cursed, turned the car around and fled, his face white as stone.

AFTER that came something akin to madness. Callister could not escape the force-dome. He could not find and enlist aid, for he had purposely built his home in an isolated part of the Angeles Forest, and this was not the camping season.

A week passed. Two weeks. Callister lost track of the days. He was horribly alone, and was grateful for the shelter that the deserted lodge of the girl and her parents provided. Like the ranger and Tommy, they were no longer recognizable, either. They were three-eyed giants. They had regained humanity's lost heritage.

One evening, crouching by the fire in the hearth, Callister looked up in time to see a figure materialize from the air beside him. Instinctively he leaped up, but the three-eyed man, now completely tangible, smiled reassuringly.

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"I mean you no harm, Callister. We must ask you to leave this building. It must be destroyed. We are remodeling and landscaping, and this structure is not functional or fitting."

Callister licked his lips.

"Are you—Prendergast?"

Despite himself, he could not help but feel an unwilling admiration for the super-being who stood before him, looking like the perfect matrix from which humanity had been imperfectly molded.

"Prendergast?" the thought came. "Oh—I see. No. I was the hermit who lived in the cave across the valley from your house. Now I am changed, of course.

"I must raze this structure immediately. Will you leave, please?"

But Callister couldn't speak.

He had to get out, naturally. And then there was no shelter and no food. He tried to hunt. His clothes were in rags. He was, within a week, filthy, bearded, unkempt and miserable. Worst of all was the realization that eventually he'd have to join the three-eyed giants.

And once he had done that, he would like it.

Egotism held him back. He procrastinated. All his life he had felt himself a cut above the average, completely civilized. Secure in his eminence, utterly self-confident of his status, he had looked down with pity and perhaps some smugness. He was the *ne plus ultra*—

When he joined the three-eyed group, he would move up. He would become far more civilized. And thus, automatically, he would admit that his previous existence had been comparative barbarism. He would instantly cancel the long years of his own cultured humanity.

It was egotism that held him back for a little time, refusal to smash his fetish to shards, even for the reward offered. It was not fear that halted him, for there was no reason to be afraid. He would be welcomed.

Well—

He was hungry; there was only a little left of the deer he had killed last week. Hunkered down on his hams, he crouched at the mouth of the hermit's cave and reached for a greasy bone to which some shreds of meat still clung. Sunlight warmed his half-naked hide.

Down across the valley, the rebuilt house stood, strange and lovely in its alienage. Abruptly Callister turned to stare at the spot, his attention attracted by the flash of sunlight binoculars.

Someone was watching him. He wondered, with a sick horror, if it was the three-eyed man who had been the hermit.

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(Continued from page 106)

them. All your shorts are terrible. Of the three magazines your company publishes, TWS is the worst. STARTLING STORIES and CAPTAIN FUTURE have you beat by a mile, and they are two good magazines. Get rid of Bergey.

And darn tootin', give us a TWS Annual, but give us stories from 'way back. Try to get as good as your two sister magazines, and you'll be doing all right.—*138 Townsend St., New Brunswick, N. J.*

Thanks for nothing, bub. But the old Sarge isn't going to throw his Xeno jug at you. Instead, I've a better suggestion. Since you like STARTLING STORIES and CAPTAIN FUTURE so well, why don't you write to the correspondence editor of those sterling publications? I know him, Horatio, a charming astrogator named Sergeant Saturn. Let him knock your teeth out with a spare rocket sleeve. Anyway, thanks for wanting an annual of such a bad magazine.

ARTISTIC TROUBLE
By N. L. Nielsen

Dear Sarge: In reference to illustration, Pages 18-19, "The Infinite Moment," April:

1. "The young physicist was a small-boned man, lean and wiry, with shoulders stooped by years spent in study and research. His thin face was pleasantly ordinary, with keen blue eyes and a permanent wrinkle between the dark brows" (P. 19). BUT, in the picture his shoulders are as wide as a barn door, and he looks like a farm-hand who never held a book in his life. "The helmet he slipped over his head" (P. 24). BUT in the picture, there is **no** helmet on his head.

And "His leg (P. 25) buckled and he came down heavily on the concrete floor." BUT in the illustration, he is standing on both feet, and is far from horizontal. In the picture the floor is wooden, not concrete.

2. "The man who closed the door gently behind him was as big as Steve" (P. 21). BUT, in the picture, he is definitely a runt. "He wore well fitting tweeds" (P. 21). BUT, in the picture he is quite sloppily dressed, and not in tweeds either, brother. "His smooth, handsome face . . ." In the picture he has a rough face, and, though this is a matter for opinion, of course, he is not exactly handsome. "Blond hair was brushed back smoothly from his forehead" (P. 21). IN the picture his hair is not smooth or brushed—also it is very dark and **not** blond. "Hat in hand, he smiled. . . ." (P. 21). IN the picture the villain is wearing a **cap.**

3. I am not criticizing the illustrator, especially, because otherwise the drawing is okay. I suggest that drawings be proof-read and checked, that's all.—*736 N. Hunter St., Stockton, Cal.*

Okay, Kiwi Nielsen, I'll pass your comment on to Artist Schomburg. In fact, I'll rub his nose in it. I don't think you'll have any more such complaints, as we are systematizing the art department and the wealth of detail about which you pee-lots out there on the spaceways know nothing. Every man to his own kind of headache. The old Sarge will stick to herding you space apes and his Xeno jug.

APRIL WONDER IN REVIEW
By Ray R. Russell

Dear Sergeant Saturn: Here's the April, 1942, issue of TWS passing in review. Let's travel right down the table of contents:

(1.) "The Infinite Moment." Not bad, not bad. But not great.

(2.) "Super-Athlete." Pure imitation, Sarge. 'Way back before you polluted these fair pages (issue of Dec., 1939) Manley Wellman gave us a short yarn called "The Einstein Slugger." (Remember, readers?) Same thing—speeded-up pug, speech all run together when he wasn't careful, everything. Even the illustration was quite a bit similar. Wellman's tale (aside from being the original one) was the better of the two.

(3.) "Plants Must Slay." Not very bad. Long's best story was "The Black Vortex" ('37).

(4.) "Twisted Dimensions." Not much science, but an amusing change. Nice style.

(5.) "Regeneration." I didn't read the other stories, and I guess that makes a difference. All I can say is that the story, taken by itself, was poor. I wonder if Karel Capek ever regrets dreaming up the robot revolt idea?

(6.) "The Plastic Genie." Pfui. Just filler.

(7.) "Spaceman's Savvy." A slightly less potent grade of pfui. Also just filler.

As for the annual—if it will steer clear of the stuff in the April issue—and others like it—okay, I'm for it. Half a buck is plenty, tho.

Do you think TWS could regain its high standard of 1937-40?

One more thing before I leave. Remember how the old WONDER had letters answered intelligently by the editor? How about reverting to that? I'm sure you'll find many agree with me. And as for you, Saturn—you moronic ham—go drown yourself in that blankety-blank Xeno!—*4122 W. Gladys Ave., Chicago, Ill.*

You write an intelligent letter, Kiwi Russell, even though you are a bit autocratic in your opinions. We thought the Tracy and Wellman yarns sufficiently different to publish. And you're stepping out of line with your cry of "imitation." That isn't nice talk—unless you had proof of such a business. For your information, the two authors in question don't even know each other and do not read each other's stuff. And they are both pretty well known writers. So pull in your horns and go on with your innocuous *pfui-pfui* outboard motoring.

ASCHOMBURG! ASCHOMBURG!
By D. W. Boggs

Dear Sarge Saturn: **Who is this guy Schomburg?** Don't worry—I liked his pics, but can't recall ever seeing any other art work signed by him. More, more, please! After viewing that double-spread of his on Pages 18 and 19 of this April issue, I unhesitatingly nominate him as the New Find of the Year, if new find he really is.

That "Ginger Rogers" femme he drew is the cutest dish ever seen in a pulp mag outside of a Finlay illustration. She is vaguely reminiscent of some of Schneeman's creations of a few years back. Take an option on Schomburg, set him down at a drawing-board, and give him every story on hand to illustrate. That feller can really draw—something most of your other "artists" can't do.

Marchioni's crude drawings often detract from the effectiveness of a yarn. Wesso is passable, but please obtain some artists like Finlay, Orban, Dolgov, or Bok.

There seems to be some sort of story printed around these Schomburg pics. Sort of an added attraction, no doubt. It's called "The Infinite Moment." This tale doesn't strike me as anything very terrific, but I usually enjoy a Kuttner story. However, I think

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Lana should have accompanied Denham to the sub-atomic universe. I'd like to have seen her become jealous of Varr. "That catty woman!"

I see that Hank gives credit to Clarence Day and H. P. Lovecraft for ideas incorporated into this yarn. Ray Cummings deserved credit, too, altho this story appealed to me more than any of RC's "Golden Atom" tales, "classics" tho they are called.

I'll take "Super-Athlete" and "Plants Must Slay." They were both very good. John Carstairs reminds me of Ellery Queen. But, Sarge, **you** may take "Spaceman's Savvy" and "Twisted Dimensions." Take them and burn them.

Oof! Pardon the nasal quality of the commentary at this point—I'm holding my nose. Yes, I've just finished reading "Regeneration" and "The Plastic Genie." These rate even lower than the two I consigned to the incinerator. Really, Sarge, why foist such MSS. (pronounced "messes") onto us poor stfans? We didn't do anything to **you!**

Next issue looms up as a stellar number, what with "Thunder to Venus." Hope it's as good as "The Gods Hate Kansas." And a Pete Manx yarn scheduled! Oh, yes, and a story by "N. J. Westwood"! Heh, heh, that's a good nom de typewriter!

Hey, Sarge, how about giving us the Schomburg Beauty in technicolor—on the cover? Wrapped in the writhing coils of a BEM, she'd sell a lot more TWS mags than the stalwart demi-genie on this issue's cover.—*2215 Benjamin Street N. E., Minneapolis, Minnesota.*

Wake up, Pee-lot Boggs. You've been asleep at the switch. Schomburg is not new; you've just discovered him. And I gather that you were smitten with Lana. Why didn't you tell me you liked girls like this? Now, there are some beauts in the Spaceman's Palace on Neptune. One trip when I was on the Neptune to Saturn run with the old Irium Mining Corporation—but never mind that now.

Sure, we'll have more Schomburg. Wait and see.

NUTS TO SATURN
By Charles Lee Riddle

Dear Sir: You will, of course, notice that I did not call you Sergeant Saturn. Why? I think it is silly and away off the standard that THRILLING WONDER STORIES used to have before some befuddled person thought up you.

Up till now I have been content to sit on the sidelines and watch you and various others make a fool out of yourselves. But I have reached the point where I must write in and express myself.

To begin with—What in the name of Samuel do some readers expect us to think when they write in letters beginning—"I'm just 13 and I've been reading your glorious and grand magazines for nigh on 8 years!" Pish, tosh, and likewise bosh! Maybe they think we are still young enough to believe all that we read and hear. I'm not old (still under the draft age) but I have more sense than that, believe it or not.

And then that silly chatter of yours. Why don't you just come out and answer the questions plainly instead of mixing in Xeno jugs and rocket-blasts, etc., etc.? It would be much more effective and twice as interesting.

I'll admit that all of the magazine is not bad, but in the words of the high school group in Fort Smith, you're "putrid."

Now don't get me wrong. I don't dislike the story content. Up till now they have been of the best quality. I hope they just continue to rate as high. And as concerning the trimmed edges, I don't buy the magazine for the looks. I buy it for the enjoyment I can get out of the reading material.

I think that I have eased my chest a little bit.—*Box 212, Ft. Smith, Ark.*

You certainly have, young squirt. Don't tell me that the renowned Hell-on-the-Border town has gone intelligensia on us. But don't let's get technical, pee-lot; it might surprise you how much the old Sarge knows about your city, from Lake Ft. Smith to little Juarez.

I'll bet you cut classes to hang out at Cooley Drug. Too bad you didn't attend F.S.H.S. in the days of H. C. Morrison and Mary K. Settle. They'd have taken the starch out of you, instead of leaving you on the hands of a hard-working astrogator of the good ship TWS. Now, ask the old Sarge a few questions and see if you get the right answers.

LATIN FROM MANHATTAN
By Manuel Riscano

Dear Sergeant Saturn: Hold on tight to your buggy because from now on you're going to have your hands full. Yessurie, they call me The Spitfire Kid. The biggest killer-diller of nine planets, and I'm roaring with blazing rockets straight for your ship, so be quick in answering my questions before I chase you clear out to Pluto.

First of all, my fine Sergeant, I've roamed this universe buying TWS, SS, and CF stories day in and day out. Until my ship can hardly lift the load, but did I find in them what I've been hoping for? You can bet your boots I haven't!

I'm not a writer; in fact, I couldn't write a story even if I stood on my head, but I'm artistically inclined, and probably so are several hundred other readers of science

[*Turn page*]

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fiction. Of what use is your story-writing contest to us—eh? We, too, are human beings (I think) and we demand our rights; so how about an **Artist Contest?**

Yes, you have Earle Bergey, Howard V. Brown, H. Wesso, Wallace Saaty, Virgil Finlay, Marchioni, Rudy Belarski and Alex Schomburg, but have you been able to find an artist who's as good as Paul? The answer is no. Why not try and see whether or not there's another Paul hiding in the mist of that great crowd of science fiction readers?

I'd rather be stranded on Mercury than say that which I'm now going to, but it's the truth, so here goes. The stories are superb, they're excellent, in fact they are great, and when I say they're great they **Are Great,** and I'll blast him out of this universe who says different.

Speaking of greatness, that accompanying magazine, CAPTAIN FUTURE, deserves the highest award in science fiction. He is a great lad, that future kid. Why, it gives me sort of a keen emotion to know that America had, has, and will always have a man as great as he.

Well, blow my rockets if it isn't time to leave you stranded, so, adios and farewell, Sergeant Saturn, until we meet again.—*147 Orchard St., New York, N. Y.*

Bully for you, Kiwi Manuel, you've got the old pep and spirit. And you might have something in that "Artist Contest" idea. The only trouble is that we'd have a lot of pics on hand—and no stories to fit them to. But some of the pee-lots think they don't fit, anyway, so why don't you send us in a science fiction drawing sometime, and we'll gladly tell you what we think of your talent. If we can use the drawing, we'll buy it. Or if the old Sarge can figure out a way to make such a contest practical, we may adopt your suggestion.

And now for a final rocket blast from California before we head for the home port.

CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM
By George V. Fair

Dear Sarge: I am very happy to report that your three wonderful magazines have been chosen by the SSFA (Supporters of Science Fiction in America) as three of the six best science fiction magazines in that field.

We consider ourselves as the Gallup poll of sf and we are an exclusive organization which is slowly growing with members in New England, New York, Milwaukee and honorary members in London, England. At times different members give all their copies of that month's six issues of the sf mags which are on our "favorites" list, and these mags are given to the SSFA's mailing and communications committee who in turn mail them to the members in London.

The SSFA, in choosing the six best sf mags, considers if they have individuality, informality to a certain extent, educational value, and of course if they made good reading.

Our aims are to support and defend sf as a group, defend it from criticism and definitely defend it from anyone who tries to suppress it in any way. We also boost its popularity by introducing it to people unfamiliar with it. One of our arguments for its support is if people praise H. G. Wells' attempts at sf with his "War of the Worlds," and "The First Trip to the Moon," why can't Wellman's, Cummings', Millard's, etc., writings be more so accepted for modern ideas and a dozen other factors?

It is impossible to attempt to select a favorite among the six because each mag's popularity increases and decreases with the quality of its stories. Its popularity varies each month much like a stock market fluctuates.

So you could be tops for a while and then slump and then with some good stories, which would be the equivalent of a shot of adrenalin, revive.

When we write any editor we agree that any criticism that we make as a group will be friendly and helpful. That's the trouble with so many so-called fans. They criticise you to death. Well, then, why don't they stop reading them! Seriously though, they can, we feel, at least be constructive instead of destructive.

Oh, yes! We voted to see if any of the members could suggest anything to the betterment of your magazine and this is what followed. First, your covers on all three of your mags are good with every now and then something special being added that turns them into what we call a "whizeroo." And, for heaven's sake, get your artists to read the stories before they draw anything. And also have the artists if possible read the authors' descriptions of the objects they are going to draw.

Second, we found that Bok had a mild sort of unpopularity with the majority of us. Third, there isn't any criticism for anything on the inside, but instead there is many a compliment. Next to the stories, the Reader Speaks cops the cake in popularity among us. Last but not least, there was a 100% vote acclaiming a THRILLING WONDER Annual. We all voted on the price to be about 50c, knowing that higher the price the more meat you boys'll put in it. But listen, pard, don't put that price over the heads of some of us who **work** for our dough!

If our enthusiasm is any indication, the annual, if you print it, will be a sell-out among sf fans.

Well, Sarge, this is signing off and wishing you more luck toward getting less letters like those from a certain somebody from Oakland. —*1029 East Gutierrez St., Santa Barbara, Calif.*

Well, George, that's certainly a glowing compliment. You've actually got the old Space Dog squirming on his astrogation seat like a Plutonian Ice Worm in the Red Spot of Jupiter. And with a face as red as that talked-about devil on the February cover.

And thanks for the classification of THRILLING WONDER STORIES, STARTLING STORIES, and CAPTAIN FUTURE. We do try our dead level best to stay out in front in the realm of science fiction, but it's no boy's job. The nicest part of your compliment is what you say about THE READER SPEAKS. This department waxes and wanes according to the type of stuff you pee-lots feed it. It is truly your department, and the old Sarge just tries to follow the general vein of the letters. That is why it sometimes seems corny to certain kiwis and the next time seems excellent to those same junior astrogators.

But corny or excellent, it is *your* department, and everybody is allowed to have his say!

Now before the old Sarge gets maudlin, all you kiwis fall to and tidy up the old ship. I've got to perform a syphon experiment on a Xeno jug.

—SERGEANT SATURN.

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Read Our Companion Magazines: STARTLING STORIES and CAPTAIN FUTURE

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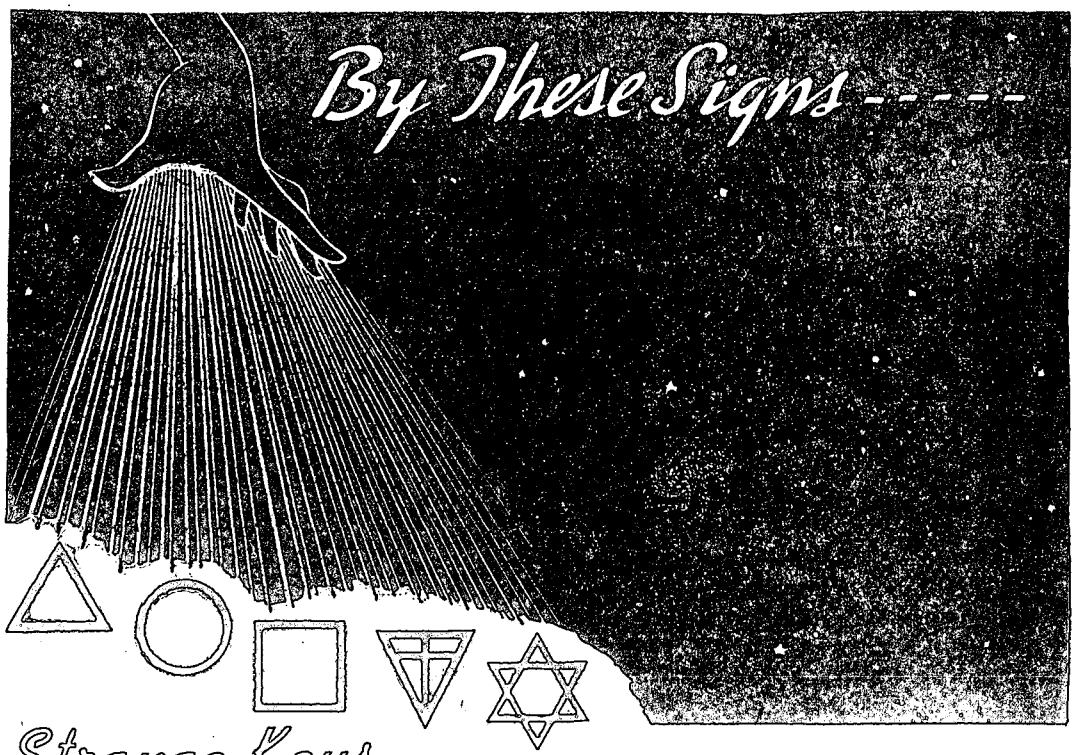

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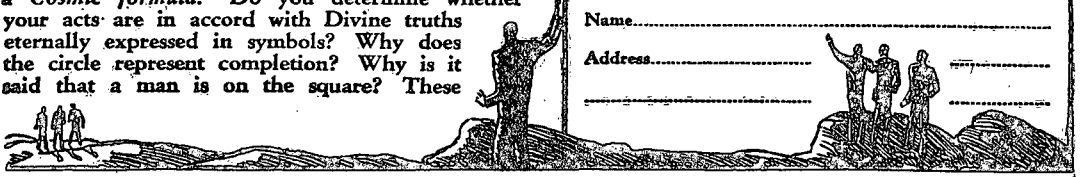

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THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

THERE is no science fiction reader who has not become aware of the growing popularity of the work of Joseph J. Millard. This acclaim is well merited, for there is no more earnest or hard-working craftsman in the field today.

Your editor knows Joe Millard personally and can paint you a good word picture of the fairly tall, slender, sandy-haired and blue-eyed chap with the pipe and the friendly smile—and the dead-level-best air. And Joe always tries his dead-level best.

Doubtless, that is how he gets so much human feeling into his stories. Now, in THUNDER TO VENUS, he—but let Author Millard tell you in his own way:

"Thunder to Venus" represents a revolt—a revolt against mad Martians and bug-eyed monsters, against eight-legged Hitlers who want to make the cosmos safe for autocracy and against super-rays and disintegrators and animated tomato cans that rebel against their creators—in short, a complete revolt against all the time-honored trappings of science fiction.

In a way, too, it was a revolt against my bread and butter because, having received the editorial okay on a totally different and highly conventional sf yarn, I went home and threw the old thing in the waste basket and, instead, wrote the story I've always wanted to write. My only concession to convention was in the use of the green amnesia fog. That isn't as far-fetched as it might seem, though, for comparable seepages of strange gases exist on Earth to the confusion of unsuspecting passersby. For example, the famed Oracle of Delphi turns out to be only a sort of laughing gas well where visitors unknowingly let themselves be gassed into all sorts of dreams and hallucinations.

But aside from the gas, "Thunder to Venus" isn't a story of science fiction at all. It's the story of a man, a common, ordinary, garden-variety man with human feelings and emotions and fairly normal reactions to his environment. At least, that's what I tried to make it, just as I tried to make tomorrow believable and understandable, not as a sharp contrast to our present world but as a logical and not too Utopian outgrowth of today.

I couldn't have written "Thunder to Venus" the way it's written but for one thing. I believe implicitly in that particular kind of tomorrow that I tried to describe there. It's as real in my mind as Times Square after dark, or the sunrise over one of my native Minnesota lakes. Like many sf writers, and fans as well, I have worked out my own private history of civilization as projected into the next hundred and fifty or two hundred years. Hereafter I hope to cleave to that history, writing only stories that illuminate some part as I believe it will truly be.

Some peculiar psychological quirk in my make-up keeps me intensely interested in any effort until it succeeds, in any game until it is won. Then, when a goal has been reached or a problem solved, I become bored and drift off to turn my interest on some other struggle. So much science fiction is written after man has conquered interplanetary space, unlocked atomic power, solved his problems of government and life that I can't get terribly excited about either writing or reading it. What interests me intensely is man's pitiful crawling struggle to attain those things while they're still far in the future.

In "Thunder to Venus" man has reached the nearer planets but hasn't turned them into suburban communities. He has started to build interplanetary traffic but he's still bucking a hundred and one problems incident to the job. In other words, it's man pioneering in colonization, space flight and the commercial adjustments required by those widening frontiers. That's why writing it was more fun than any job I ever tackled.

There's another story still squirming and squawling for birth in the back of my head. It's one I've wanted to write since I first began reading science fiction—the story of man struggling and finally achieving the first flight to the Moon. I can visualize that clearly—the struggles and heartbreaks and indomitable courage that will finally culminate in that first lunar landing. I can see it done, not with super gadgets and atomic power but with tools that are no more than small improvements over today's instruments, with power that is only a refinement of what we already have. And I can see that happening within your lifetime, and mine.

One of these days, maybe, I'll revolt again and write it. It all depends on how you like "Thunder to Venus."

—*Joseph J. Millard.*

ASTEROID CASTAWAYS

GETTING word from some of our energetic authors today is almost like getting a message from Garcia. But we managed to catch Manly Wellman between finishing a tour of guard duty, "out in the cold, cold sticks with Gov. Edison's Own Light Infantry, the State Guard," as Manly puts it, and communicating with Washington over a possible commission in the regular army. In this breathing spell he dashed off a note about ASTEROID CASTAWAYS. But a word, first, about this Manly Wade Wellman himself.

He is a husky six-footer and weighs well over two hundred pounds, and is a jovial, good-looking devil with a trim little black mustache. His hair and eyes are jet-black. While he is scarcely middle-aged, he saw some strenuous service in the first World

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War. It certainly won't make any of us feel less secure to know that Manly is about to enter this war with both sturdy feet—except maybe Japs and Nazis. Here's what Manly says:

In the Thirtieth Century, to which I give so much time and thought, things will be ALMOST perfect, ALMOST complete, ALMOST predictable—but not quite. There will still be accidents, emergencies and non-conformists, as in the present document.

Let nobody shout "Admirable Crichton" when they read this yarn without a hero. Because it's happened so often and will always happen—products of a complex civilization being shipwrecked or lost and brought back with a thud to first principles. It doesn't need a sly Martian (though you who've been nice enough to read my yarns know that not every chrysanthemum-head harbors nasty plots) to gum things up nicely. And what happened to the luxurious spacecraft **Omen** could happen on any one of about a million asteroids.

Maybe "Asteroid Castaways" is really only the beginning of a story. My rebel-tramp-protagonist is off in a blaze of rocket fuel to cosmos knows where as the curtain comes down. Whither away? I'm not much of a one for sequels, but I might pick him up again later.

—*Manly Wade Wellman.*

DAMES IS POISON

FROM the future it is not inconsistent for us to skip back to the past. We are each of us, in a manner of speaking, like the tiny waist of an hour-glass. Before us sprinkle the tiny grains of sand which represent the years spreading out to eternity. Behind us is packed the sand of accumulated time. Or you could put it this way: We stand like the boles of trees, veritable bottlenecks of our individual ancestral lines. Before us and beyond us our tree branches off into the myriad descendants of the future. Behind us our genealogic lines spread out into the roots and network of a thousand forebears.

Let's leap the bottleneck of the confining

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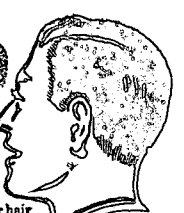

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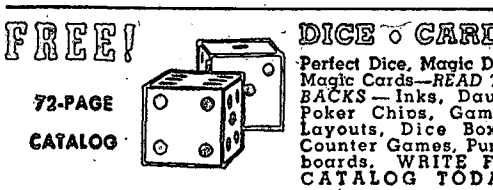
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and restricting present and delve backward with Pete Manx to learn some more of the amazing facts he unearths from the roots of time. Kelvin Kent here offers a few words on this latest excursion of Pete into the limbo of forgotten things, and we learn humorously why — DAMES IS POISON:

I've said before that when readers got tired of Pete Manx, I'd stop writing about the lad. And you'll notice that he's had a vacation for awhile. But a number of readers have been kind enough to ask for more Manx stories—so here's a new one, presented for your approval. Hope you like it.

The way I generally write these yarns is to find an interesting period of history, and then let Pete have free rein. The Borgia **milieu** was suggested to me by Mr. Russ Hodgkins, of Los Angeles; a credit line goes to him for his letter.

As I've said, Pete has been on an extended vacation. I can't say exactly where he's been, though he dropped a few vague hints about the Hialeah track in Miami, a business venture in St. Louis, and a red-head in New Orleans. I didn't press him. I just said I was glad to see him around again, and he cadged a drink, borrowed a finff, and went away.

I might forestall outraged critical shouts by blandly admitting that I've taken some liberties with known historical facts. Followers of the Pete Manx stories will realize that this is the first time I've ever swerved from the rigid track of history. The point is, Lucrezia Borgia is generally admitted to have been on the up and up, and that she was framed by her unscrupulous brother and father. She wasn't really a poisoner. Historians agree that she was the sort of girl you'd like to have for a sister.

Cesare Borgia was the bad boy of the family. Nobody but Machiavelli loved **him.** I pointed this out to Pete.

"History gives me a headache," he said rudely. "I know what happened, don't I? I was there. . . ."

Which, of course, is true enough. Pete was there, and I wasn't. So all I can say is that I regard Mr. Manx' story with a certain amount of skepticism.

Sometimes I feel I can't trust the guy.

Postscript: Any resemblance in DAMES IS POISON to actual persons is purely coincidental. —*Kelvin Kent.*

THE GLORY OF USL

IN THIS issue appears the first of a series of yarns by a writer new to our pages. Keep your eye on this newcomer from the Mississippi River Valley country. You're going to chuckle more than once over his vigorous, slightly humorous, and highly entertaining tales of the adventures of these three new spaceteers—Dude Cardigan, Screwtube Mace and Astra. About the first yarn, THE GLORY OF USL, here's what Author Westwood says:

The story behind Dude Cardigan and Astra and Screwtube Mace goes back to a very

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definite beginning. Unlike most stories, every step of its genesis is clear-cut and unmistakable.

About nineteen twenty-eight or nine, I was part of a Flying Circus group putting on Sky Carnivals through the northwest. In those days, aviation was still struggling to break away from its youth and stumble into an awkward adolescence. People were still afraid of the air and only the very daring ones would plunk down five bucks for a three-minute sky-jaunt. But every time someone did take that "conditioning" trip, he or she became a confirmed air enthusiast ever after.

Recognizing this fact, the leading airplane manufacturers sent ships to take part in the tour to help make America air-minded. Flying schools and airlines did their part until at times our tiny nucleus of twelve or thirteen planes was enhanced to a thundering fleet of as high as thirty-five or forty. We landed at a town where our "circus" had been booked, put on an afternoon of stunts and thrills and wound it up by giving every pilot a chance to make extra money "hopping" passengers. That night we rounded out the show with a dance to the music of the world's first flying dance orchestra.

One summer of this equipped me with memories I'll never lose. Talking over those days was, however, as far as I had ever thought of going. Then one evening, while visiting with some friends the subject of air carnivals came up.

"You ought to be kicked," one remarked disgustedly to me in the course of our talk. "With a background like that, you ought to transfer it to the flying of the future. One of these days, space travel will be going through the same formative period and fighting the same battles for public acceptance and confidence. Why don't you write about that time?"

The idea stuck and sprouted. Universal Space Lines was born, and then the characters. I wanted to write a dramatic and thrilling story, with plenty of punch and soul-wrenching suspense. In fact, I tried for a couple of weeks to write that story and it simply would not jell.

I kept remembering the wild gang who made up our Circus. There was Red, who

[*Turn page*]

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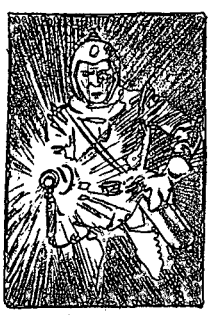

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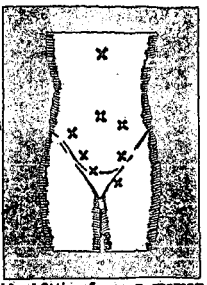

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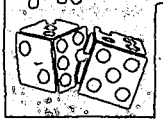

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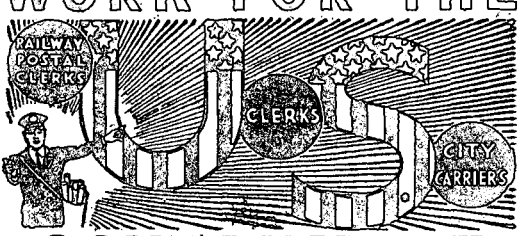

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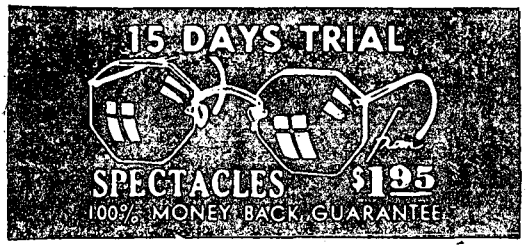

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got us all kicked out of a boarding house one night when a bottle of spiked beer exploded in the landlady's face. (That was during prohibition.) There was Billy, who got a brand new Kinner-powered Eagle and started out with everything but water in it. Only a miracle saved his neck when the pistons "froze" and he came down through a barbed-wire fence to a dead-stick landing.

And I remembered little Otto, who flew a brand new Robin but who loved to decorate it with strips of tape and patches and mismated wheels until it looked like a wreck in the last stages of disintegration. Or the rough day I got air-sick and sat down in a farmer's corn field—to be chased out by a bulldog.

Try and write a "heavy" drama from gay memories like that. So my somber Cardigan became "Dude" Cardigan and the other characters lightened up. I began to write my story in the same vein as the one I had lived, light and humorous, and the troubles were over. From that point on, the "Glory of U. S. L." kicked me away from the typewriter and romped itself through to its own conclusion.

It was fun to write, then, and I hope it will be as much fun to read. If it is, it would be still more fun to write more of those yarns. But that's up to the readers.

—*N. J. Westwood.*

We thought it so much fun that we commissioned Barnstormer Westwood to do others, and we can promise you readers at least two more stories in this stirring series.

There is another newcomer, not only to us, but to the world of professional fiction as well. You'll find a bit of information on the Amateur Story Contest winner for this issue, Samuel Hoffman, along with his story, LAST DISAPPEARANCE.

Write Sergeant Saturn exactly what you think. He won't do more than growl and snap back. I keep him chained to his desk.

—THE EDITOR.

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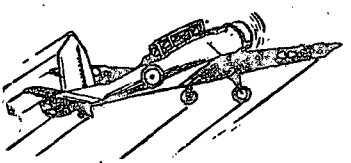

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LOOKING FORWARD

(Continued from page 9)

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COMMUNICATIONS

I MUST answer an inquiry about a League club for Paul E. Anderson of Los Angeles, Calif. Paul, you might get in touch with the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society at 1055 Wilshire Blvd. of your city. Mr. Russ Hodgkins is the secretary.

Next; Samuel S. Saltzman of Paterson, N. J., wishes to know if we will endorse the establishment of a local SCIENCE FICTION LEAGUE club. Sam, we certainly will. There may already be a club in your area—I'm not sure, what with the confusion of straightening out the various clubs which are not reporting in to us—but if you gather a group together who want a chapter charter, just write in to the SCIENCE FICTION LEAGUE here at the main office.

Donavin Davis writes us from Clarksburg, W. Va., that he is anxious to form a club of local SCIENCE FICTION LEAGUE members. Those interested around Clarksburg should write him care of the Yerbious Club Plan, Station A, Box 1, Clarksburg, W. Va.

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—[*Turn page*]

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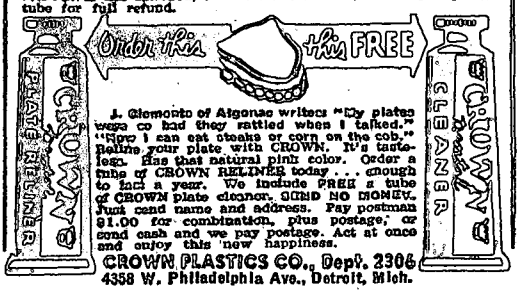

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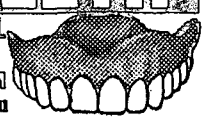

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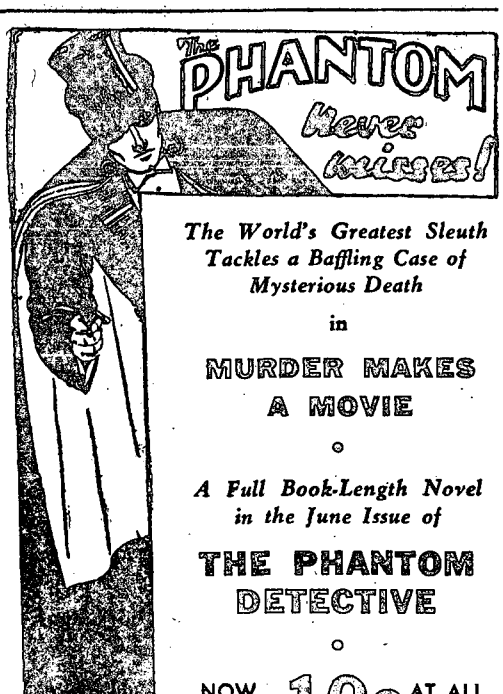

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And before I bid you *au revoir* until next issue, here's something else for you to look forward to.

I've just had flash from *Frank Belknap Long*, and he tells me that John Carstairs, the botanical detective, has run into a complete novel-length adventure in space! Don't fool yourself about whether or not you're going to like this yarn about ether robots. You will. Anyway, you can argue all details with Sergeant Saturn.

I think the old Sarge is spoiling for a good scrap.

Scienti-factually yours,

—THE EDITOR.

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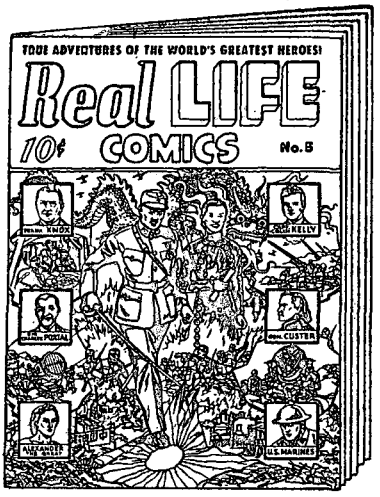

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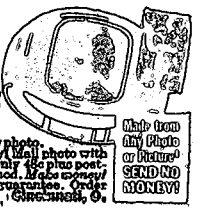

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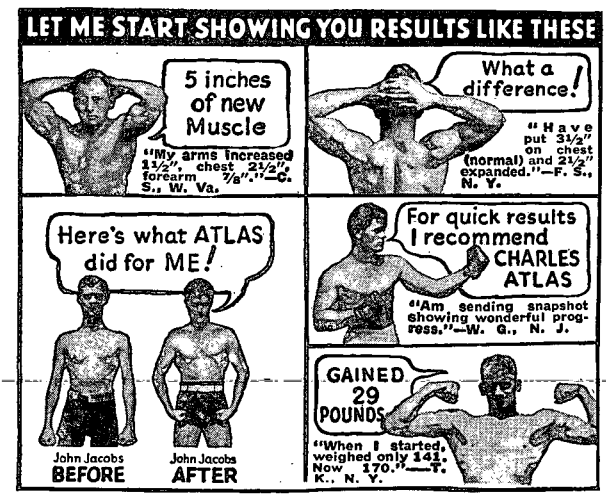
LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE
5 inches of new Muscle
"My arms increased 1½", chest 2½", forearm ⅞".'—C. S., W. Va.
What a difference!
"Have put 3½" on chest (normal) and 2½" expanded."—F. S., N. Y.
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For quick results I recommend CHARLES ATLAS
"Am sending snapshot showing wonderful progress."—W. G., N. J.
GAINED 29 POUNDS
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This is a recent photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

What's My Secret?

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—**my way.** I give you **no gadgets or contraptions to fool with.** When you have learned to develop your strength through *"Dynamic Tension,"* you can laugh at **artificial** muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid LIVE MUSCLE.

My method—*"Dynamic Tension"*—will turn the trick for you. No **theory**—every exercise is **practical.** And, man, **so easy!** Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of *"Dynamic Tension"* almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

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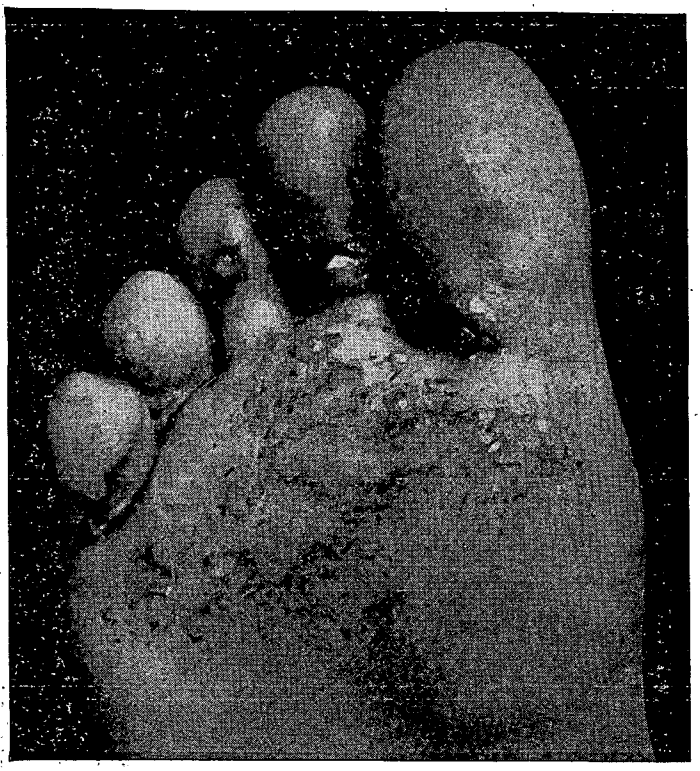
FOOT ITCH

ATHLETE'S FOOT



PAY NOTHING TILL RELIEVED

Send Coupon

At least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

WHY TAKE CHANCES?

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to destroy the germ, whereas, upon contact, laboratory tests show that H. F. will kill the germ Tinea Trichophyton within 15 seconds.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of relieving Athlete's foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. H. F. gently peels the skin which enables it to get to parasites which exist under the outer cuticle.

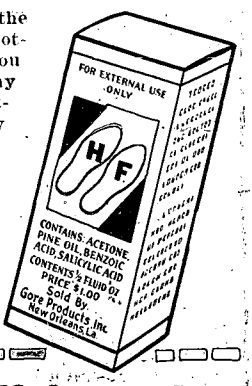
ITCHING OFTEN RELIEVED QUICKLY

As soon as you apply H. F. you may find that the itching is relieved. You should paint the infected part with H. F. every night until your feet are better. Usually this takes from three to ten days.

H. F. should leave the skin soft and smooth. You may marvel at the quick way it brings you relief. It costs you nothing to try, so if you are troubled with Athlete's Foot why wait a day longer?

H. F. SENT ON FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us $1 for the bottle at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.



GORE PRODUCTS, Inc. T. F. U.
814 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a bottle of H. F. for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you $1. If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

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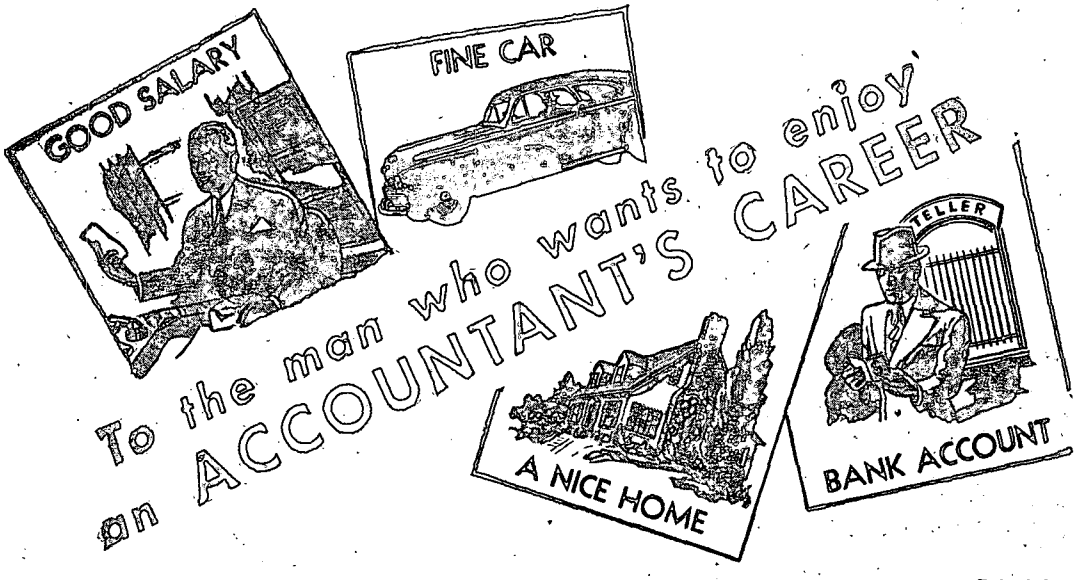

IF you're that man, here's something that will interest you.

Not a magic formula—not a get-rich-quick scheme—but something more substantial, more practical.

Of course, you need something more than just the desire to be an accountant. You've got to pay the price—be willing to study earnestly, thoroughly.

Still, wouldn't it be worth your while to sacrifice some of your leisure in favor of interesting home study—over a comparatively brief period in your life? Always provided that the rewards were good—a salary of $3,000 to $10,000?

An accountant's duties are interesting, varied and of real worth to his employers. He has *standing!*

Do you feel that such things aren't for you? Well, don't be too sure. Very possibly they *can* be!

Why not, like so many before you, investigate LaSalle's modern Problem Method of training for an accountancy position?

Just suppose you were permitted to work in a large accounting house under the personal supervision of an expert accountant. Suppose, with his aid, you studied accounting principles and solved problems day by day—easy ones at first—then the more difficult ones. If you could do this—and if you could turn to him for advice as the problems became complex—soon you'd master them all.

That's the training you follow in principle under the LaSalle Problem Method.

You cover accountancy from the basic Principles right up through Accountancy Systems and Income Tax Procedure. Then you add C. P. A. Training and prepare for the C. P. A. examinations.

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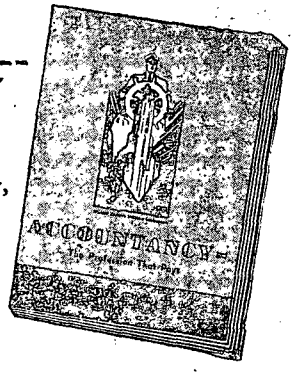

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